

EXPLORING SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, HORROR & ROLEPLAYING

INTERREGNUM

#38

An Amateur Press Association
exploring the worlds of
Roleplaying, Fantasy, and Science Fiction



Kiralee McCauley, Editor

Topics: Props, Paraphernalia, and Stage Dressing Crossing Generations in Games and Fiction

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PUBLICATION SCHEDULE

⇒ The Deadline for inclusion in Interregnum #39 is May 15th. The topics are **Favorite House Rules** and **Gathering The Heroes**. Interregnum #39 will be mailed around June 1st.

⇒ The Deadline for inclusion in Interregnum #40 is July 1st. The topics are **When Styles Clash** and **What Breaks the Suspension of Disbelief?** Interregnum #40 will be mailed around July 15th.



The Editor's Soapbox

Upcoming Topics:

Next Issue, Topic A: **Favorite House Rules.** Most gaming groups develop their own additional rules and mechanics for the roleplaying games that they play to make them smoother, easier or more to their own style than just plain "Out of the Book". We'd like you to take one of the commonly available games that you play and tell us about what house rules you've developed that might be of interest to everyone here.

Next Issue, Topic B: **Gathering The Heroes.** The hardest part of starting a new campaign is getting the characters together for the first time, creating connections between them and giving them real motivation to work together (or at least associate with each other). We're looking for better methods than the classic "You're all sitting in the local tavern one evening..." and the "You've all been hired separately by The Corporation..." and "You've all known each other for years, having grown up in the neighborhood." Tell us what's worked, what's failed, and why.

Following Issue, Topic A: **When Styles Clash.** Sometimes you discover the game you thought you were playing isn't exactly the same game everyone else is playing. The mechanics and the setting are the same, but the challenges you expected to face, and the things you expected to happen, just aren't there. Maybe you're looking for intrigue, and the game is a dungeon crawl; maybe you want to face tough ethical questions, and instead you're playing in a soap opera; maybe you thought it was a Heroic fight against Evil, and everybody's gotten bogged down in nitty gritty skirmishes with minor crime lords; maybe you're the GM, and the players just won't do anything fun. Nearly everyone has run into this at some point. How do you deal with it, without losing your cool, doing things you don't enjoy, or making lots of enemies?

Following Issue, Topic B: **What Breaks the Suspension of Disbelief?** One of the most important things to do in a roleplaying game (or fictional story) is to get the players / readers to suspend their disbelief. Luckily, most players will give the GM the benefit of the doubt, suspending their disbelief until it is broken by some inconsistency or unrealistic aspect of the game / story. What kinds of things cause you problems, and break your suspension of disbelief? What makes a game world seem inconsistent to you? Do you have any experience with games where the suspension of disbelief is broken? How did the GM deal with it? What happened?





Words on the Wing

ISSUE #9

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Review of Civilization: Call to Power

I got a new computer recently, so I now have a DVD drive and am able to play Activision's Civilization: Call to Power which only comes on DVD. It's obvious from the moment you begin play that there have been some changes. The graphics are much better, including three dimensional animated units. If you send a mounted unit across the screen, his horse will actually gallop as you watch. Many of the units have war cries that they say when given orders. When units engage in combat, they actually swing swords or shoot guns at each other. You can also right click on a city to see the workers hoe their fields and the slaves swing their pick axes. (This may look a little odd if they are working a water square.)

The player's color is always blue. This is a minor point, but I liked being able to choose what color I wanted to be. Also, this change removes the sole consequence of the nationality you choose at the start. However, there are other changes that more than make up for this. You can choose the frequency of trade goods and the diversity of the terrain. You can decide to play on a donut shaped world rather than a globe. (This connects the north and south edges of the map.) The game also starts you with two settlers (at the two lowest settings) and a number of random technological advances based on difficulty. There are advances which are officially considered to be prerequisites for the basic tile improvements of roads, farms and mines, so it is possible to not have access to all of them right away if playing at the higher difficulty levels. However, the randomizer seems to be stacked in favor of those three advances, so you will usually have access to at least two of them. A more minor change that is still very useful is that you can now delete old saved

games from within the game rather than having to hunt down the directory and do it manually.

Trade goods are located on tiles and some of them have their own animations. All trade goods now cause the tile they are on to produce more gold. Trade routes now allow you to collect goods of a single type into one city with each additional good of the same type being worth more than the last one. Since there is a maximum number of routes that can go into a given city, it is usually best to collect a good in a city that already produces it and to collect each good in a different city. The trade routes appear as blue lines with the good moving along them. A unit in the path of a trade route can pirate the route, temporarily disrupting it and possibly destroying the caravan used to carry it.

Technological advances take an amount of science to learn based on which of the five ages they belong to rather than the number of advances you currently know. This is a nice change since it causes the difficulty to learn advances to increase as the amount of science you're likely to be able to produce does without having the difficulty of whatever you're currently researching increase if you learn unrelated advances from somewhere else. It also encourages the player to learn all the advances of one age before starting on those of the next age without forcing him to do so. All technology is worth points in this version of the game and there are four types of future technology. Two of them are prerequisites for tile improvements, so they aren't all completely useless other than for points. Note that there are a couple of technologies which make wonders obsolete, one of which does nothing

else, that are required to gain access to two of the future technologies.

The list of special units has been expanded. Corporate branches and subneural ads can drain production from an enemy's city, allowing you to benefit from it instead. Clerics and televangelists can drain gold, but I find them less effective as any military unit can reform a converted city, but it requires a lawyer to dispel a franchise. Slavers can be used to capture foreign settlers who stray onto your lands or defeated enemy soldiers and put them to work in your nearest city. Slaves have the advantage that they eat half what citizens do and get paid nothing. However, they can be rescued or encouraged to revolt by abolitionists and require a minimum of one military unit per three slaves to be kept in check. Diplomats and spies still exist, but embassies are automatically recalled if you go to war with the other country.

You can form peace treaties with other civilizations if you wish. Also any gift, exchange or demand which is accepted creates a peace treaty. These treaties are temporary and you can call up a list of active treaties including their durations at any time. You can only trade advances with or ask for an advance from a country you have an embassy with. The game will warn you if you attempt to enter the territory of a civilization to whom you have promised not to trespass. However, that is the only way you can tell where their territory is. The computer will not bother to warn you about breaking peace treaties by attacking units until after the attack is complete and it is too late to change your mind.

More types of government are available to choose from. Most of them give a modifier to gold, production or both. Your government type also affects things like crime and happiness modifiers for martial law, pollution or war discontent. It also sets how much your citizens expect to be paid and fed and how many hours they expect to work. If there are other results, I haven't found them yet. Unfortunately, the game gives ratings for things like production, growth and science rather than the actual mechanics. You're allowed to alter workday length as

well as wages and rations. These changes will affect the happiness of your citizens, but you can always counteract a negative modifier in one category with a positive modifier in another. This flexibility is very nice, but it does mean that a given government can be modified to be better or worse in a particular category than the rating given. The other thing is that increasing happiness may allow you to reduce the number of entertainers in your cities, turning them into merchants, scientists or laborers instead. It doesn't say so anywhere but, on the turn your period of anarchy for changing governments ends, you may change as many times as you like, examining all available forms of government if you want. As long as you make your decision before the end of the turn, there is no additional period of anarchy.

The wages required by your citizens, as well as the maintenance costs of your buildings, is subtracted from the gold generated by your civilization before determining the percentage that goes to fund scientific research or the bonuses to science or money granted by certain buildings. There are, however, now buildings which produce an amount of science or money based entirely on the number of people in the city, regardless of what they are doing.

Happiness is unrelated to gold production. You also no longer track the happiness of individual citizens, but the cities as a whole. Buildings, wonders and entertainers add points to happiness or alleviate unhappiness caused by particular factors. Riots are easier to prevent, as you always have a turn of warning before they occur during which the city name will be yellow in the city list and the city icon on the side of the screen will also be yellow. Celebrations are hard to predict, appearing to occur somewhat randomly once a city achieves happiness above a certain level. There is no maximum population to cities at any level of the game. However, population above a certain threshold causes unhappiness due to overcrowding, though there are many buildings which can reduce this problem.

There are now three levels of mine and farm type improvements for each of land, sea and space as well as three levels of roads

and the ability to build underwater tunnels. These are built, not by settlers, but by public works, a percentage of your overall production after subtracting support for your military. You may choose to set public works as high or low as you wish, though a high public works will slow production in all cities. While this new system takes some getting used to, I like it better than using settlers. Public works aren't vulnerable to attack, like units are and don't take population away from your cities. There isn't any kind of automation option, but public works accumulate from turn to turn, so if you don't spend them now, you'll have extra later. You can even save up public works to improve a newly created or captured city or to create a lot of a new tile improvement as soon as it becomes available. You can also use public works to terraform - change one terrain type to another. Like other changes to tiles, you can do more as you gain advances. Unlike other changes to tiles, the game doesn't tell you which advances allow you to create or get rid of a given terrain type. Note that changing the terrain type of a tile with trade goods causes you to lose the trade goods entirely.

I like the underwater cities, though they don't become available until late in the game. However, while space cities sound neat in concept, they leave something to be desired in actual play. Vacuum has a base 0 in food, gold and production and never has trade goods. It takes a while to get tile improvements which allow you to outproduce a land city and never end up better off than a city built in deep ocean. There are also a number of city improvements which cannot be built in space cities, and some that can't be built in underwater cities.

Military units on the same square can be locked together and operate as one. This means you can keep a military unit with a settler or other non-combatant for protection and they won't get accidentally separated. You do have to be careful though since the stacked units must abide by the movement restrictions of all units in the stack. That means that they use the slowest movement rated. Also, since horses and vehicles can't climb mountains without roads, even one

such unit can prevent an entire stack from entering a mountain tile. Also, there can be a maximum of nine units on one tile. This means that a large stack will be unable to enter or pass through cities which (presumably) have their own units guarding them. Many special abilities of units can be used while stacked. Others require you to separate the unit. It will let you try to paradrop while stacked, but only one paratrooper drops and the graphics mess up on the other ones. I like the animation for the paraproops though.

The real use, however, of stacking is combat. If you attempt to move a stack of units to a space occupied by units of another nation, the battle view will appear with the attacker on the left and defender on the right. Each side has up to three columns: the front line fighters, ranged combatants and non-combatants. All units on the tile being attacked will defend, even if not stacked. If the attacker wins, the pieces move onto the tile being fought over. This means that you will always capture a city if you defeat all its defenders. (The only exception being that you still cannot capture a city without a ground unit. You can paradrop into the defenseless city if you have a paratrooper handy.) However, it also means that attacking units as they approach your cities is only a good idea if you have military to spare. Keeping ranged and close combat units together can help both units survive. The ranged units aren't subject to damage until after the front line units are defeated, but they do get a chance to hurt or kill the enemy's front line before they get a chance to attack. The fight will continue until only one side has units left, regrouping each time either side completely loses his front line. Large battles usually result in heavy casualties on both sides.

Changes have been made to city improvements. There are now more buildings which can increase production than in the earlier version and one which increases food that is totally independent of the tile improvements around the city. When you capture a city, it retains whatever production it had towards its next city improvement, but only if you set it towards building a new improvement on the turn you capture it. You

also seem to keep whatever food is stored and can usually recover population lost during the takeover fairly quickly.

There are a number of new wonders and all the old wonders have been redesigned or at least had their name changed. One of the wonders gives you radar coverage for the entire planet. It does have the flaw that if it ever becomes obsolete, not only do you lose the radar coverage, but any unexplored parts of the map go back to being unexplored as if you had never seen them. The most irritating change in wonders is that there is no longer one which will upgrade obsolete units for you. Besides the fact that you need to continuously build more military units if you want to keep your defenses up to date, you have the problem of getting rid of the obsolete units. The game deducts from your score when a unit dies in battle, which is not unreasonable. However, it can't seem to tell

the difference between a dead unit and a disbanded one. At least low tech units require less production to maintain than high tech ones, so it's not as bad as it could be.

The alien lab that you breed an alien life form in is not really as exciting or as interesting as it ought to be considering that it is a winning condition of the game. Also the city improvements you build to place in the lab are not explained within the game, only in the manual. This contributes to the feel that you're just doing this because someone said it would let you win the game rather than because you have any idea what you're doing or any desire to accomplish it. Judging by the sorts of things they give points for, I suspect that the game is slanted towards players striving towards the win by breeding an alien life form. However, I would like to finish my win by conquest game before making a final judgment on that.

Comments on Issue #37

True Magic

I consider superhero to be its own genre, typically involving a haphazard mix of magic, science and pseudo-science. Most superhero comics, campaigns, etc. would technically qualify as both fantasy and science fiction, though a given one may lean more heavily in one direction or the other. I'll agree that radiation or bizarre chemical mixtures are highly unlikely to give anyone superhuman abilities in the real world. However, you generally have, in addition, things like robots, flying cars, high tech armor with built in gadgets and weaponry, holographic danger rooms and alien space ships. On the other hand, you also tend to have demons, pagan deities, magical creatures and powerful sorcerers. So, most superhero contains elements of both fantasy and science fiction, though I probably wouldn't use either term when describing a superhero game or story since the term superhero explains the setting better.

Firestarter

Do you ever have problems with splitting your parties? I find that usually when players or characters get stuck on the

sidelines or monopolize the GM's time it's as a result of the party splitting up. Sometimes one group is doing something more relevant to the plot than another. For example, one session of our pulp game, there were only three players present of a larger group. One of the characters decided to follow a lead and invited the other character, but not mine. So I had very little of the GM's time that week and what I did have, I spent grocery shopping.

Other times, one character may be doing something which takes more GM time per game time than another. For instance, one character is calling various NPCs to talk to them while others characters are driving to meet other NPCs and talk to them there. It may take the group traveling an hour to get there and an hour to get back. If the trip is uneventful, only the conversation they have at their destination requires GM time. It doesn't seem fair to the character who is calling to say that both get approximately half an hour of conversations and then get back together. However, it also isn't fair to the players of the characters who are doing the driving to allow that character to do anything time consuming with her remaining

two hours. How do you handle such situations? What if the GM's plans mean that something the player expects to take only a few (mostly unsupervised) die rolls and some number crunching will actually result in a complicated distraction?

I don't normally dream from someone else's point of view. Usually, I'm a version of myself, though I frequently possess abilities I can't duplicate in real life such as flight or telepathy. Sometimes I may dream about roleplaying or acting or watching television and I'll be me in parts of the dream, but my character in other parts of it. Recently I had a dream that I think was in third person though. Unfortunately, I failed to convince myself to get up long enough to write it down and forgot most of the details after I fell asleep again. When I get the chance, I'll go through my dream log and see if there are enough excerpts that would be understandable to Interregnum readers to be worth printing them here.

I started reading Ain't Nobody's Business if You Do, but haven't finished it. While getting the oversized paperback version may have been somewhat lighter and cheaper than the hardcover, it didn't change the page count and I have a lot of other reading material in my stack. It's been a while since I looked at it. I do remember feeling like he was spending a lot of time trying to convince me of things that I wouldn't be reading his book if I didn't already believe.

The Sign of the Dancing Priestess

You said that you wanted to see more about why I prefer modular mechanics. Is there anything in particular that you're looking for? I can't really think of anything I want to say on the subject that I didn't include in my article and, unfortunately, I don't find the word, "more" to be very inspiring. Maybe if you asked me some questions, I could answer them.

Tangled Webs by Cynthia A Shettle copyright 1996

Mallory listened to the stream of curses from his living room as he prepared an ice pack for the bump on Ransley's head. He thought he caught a glimpse of movement through the kitchen window, but when he looked, he couldn't see anything. Shaking his head, he went to the living room.

After a couple of minutes, Amanda returned to the window. This time the kitchen was empty. She let herself in the back door, the pitiful lock barely slowing her down. Silently Amanda approached the voices coming from the living room.

"You're an idiot! Do you realize that?" Harvey demanded from where he lay on the couch.

"I'm not an idiot," Mallory protested from the other side of the room. "Amanda was coming after us with a sword. What was I supposed to do? We'll get MacLeod when he's alone."

The Immortal woman was in the room and had her sword to Harvey's throat before either man knew she was there. "Neither of you move or..."

Mallory didn't listen to her. There was a gun lying on a table near his hand. Knowing that Amanda would kill both of them regardless of what they did, Mallory grabbed it and started shooting. His hand shook, but his first shot got lucky, penetrating Amanda's right arm.

The second bullet nearly winged Harvey as he rolled off the couch. Amanda stumbled as he fell into her and lost the already tenuous grip she had on her sword. "You'll shoot anybody, won't you?" she muttered. "Even your fellow Watchers." Grabbing the fallen weapon with her other hand as a third bullet flew over her head, Amanda decided to get the Hell out of there.

After firing two more wild shots at the retreating Immortal, Mallory went over to

Ransley. "Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right. I have an idiot for a partner. What were you thinking?"

"She was going to kill us!"

"Not right away. You could have waited until I wasn't in your line of fire."

Mallory gasped. "She knows about Pierson."

"What are you talking about?"

"Amanda said that I shot a Watcher and Pierson is the only Watcher I've shot."

"She was talking about me," Harvey muttered. "You nearly killed me in your eagerness to get her."

Mallory wasn't listening. "Dawson must have told her and MacLeod about how I killed Pierson, which means that I was right about Pierson knowing. He must have warned Dawson about us."

"Even if he did know about me, which he didn't, Pierson had no reason to suspect you until after you killed him. Do you think Dawson talked to his ghost?"

"No, not his ghost..." A burst of inspiration hit Mallory. "Pierson must have overheard me calling to warn you. I didn't think he was close enough, but... That's why he was playing dumb."

Harvey picked up the fallen ice pack and held it against his head. "Pierson specifically told you that he had no idea what you were babbling about and you killed him anyway?"

"If he really knew anything, he'd have no reason to tell me, especially if he'd found out I was working with you." Mallory stood up. "I'm going to go see Dawson." Grabbing his car keys, he headed for the door.

Harvey sighed. Dawson, in all probability, was completely ignorant of their activities. However, his assistance was the major reason MacLeod had done so well

against Horton and Harvey couldn't dismiss the possibility that Dawson had helped MacLeod on other occasions. Rising, he called out, "I'll come with you." On the off chance that Dawson might know something and might confess it, Harvey thought he ought to be there.

Amanda hurried back to where she had left Duncan's car, wishing she had parked it closer. She kept looking over her shoulder, but neither the lunatic nor the roadie were following her. Suddenly she sensed the presence of another Immortal. Damn, that was the last thing she needed with her sword arm still not quite up to fighting shape. Reaching for the weapon anyway, she looked around, continuing to move slowly forward. Amanda relaxed as she spotted the dark-haired figure leaning casually against the car that was her destination.

"I see you found Mallory's place." Adam indicated the hole in her sleeve with his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" Amanda demanded.

Adam shrugged. "I said I wanted to avoid having them see me, but that doesn't mean I'm not interested in what they're up to."

"What they've been up to is trying to kill Duncan and me! I followed them here."

Methos straightened up to his full height and looked at the angry woman dangerously. "You left Duncan alone and defenseless?"

Amanda took a step back. "You said there were only two of them and I knew he'd be all right in a couple of minutes. They were getting away!"

"They did get away," Methos pointed out.

"We can go back. They're probably still there."

Adam sighed and considered this. Two armed Immortals ought to be able to take out two mortals, even ones with guns, and he was prepared this time. "All right." Methos looked Amanda in the eyes. "But if I'm going to admit that I'm alive, they are *not* going to be allowed to leave afterwards."

Amanda nodded. The power and authority that now filled the stance of the older Immortal was in complete contrast to his normal unassuming attitude. His claim of being five thousand years old suddenly seemed much more convincing and Amanda was glad that Methos was a friend. She'd rather not have to face him as an enemy. Silently she followed the ancient Immortal to the house where the two Watchers awaited.

When he was about half a block away from their destination, Adam stopped suddenly. "They're gone."

"How...?" Amanda couldn't sense anything from the house, but they were mortals, so that was expected. Her eyes fell upon the empty driveway. "The car!"

Already on his way again, Adam nodded.

"Do you think they went after Duncan again?" Amanda asked as she hurried to catch up.

"I don't know, but Mallory has a phone you can borrow if you want to call him."

To be on the safe side, Adam watched the windows of the house for signs of lights or movement, but saw none. He stopped near the house and indicated the front door. "Will you do the honors?" he asked the thief coming up behind him.

Amanda smiled. "Piece of cake." Her lock picks took only slightly longer than the key would have and soon both Immortals were inside the building. Adam looked around while Amanda reached for the telephone.

Not surprisingly, there were no computers in the house. Adam found no

signs of the items that had been removed from his wallet earlier that day and decided that Mallory must still have them with him. Glancing at the Watcher Chronicles he found lying about the bedroom, Adam noted that both of them were on Ignace Benoit.

It occurred to Adam that since Mallory had been looking for his diary, that probably indicated that the younger Watcher kept one of his own. Sure enough, there was a book in the top draw of the dresser, under Mallory's underwear. Adam sat down on the bed to flip through the pages.

He was still reading it when Amanda found him. "There's no answer at the barge." Adam saw Amanda's worried expression as he looked up.

"He's probably just out looking for you," Adam tried to console her. "We can go over now and make sure."

As Adam rose and started to the dresser, Amanda indicated the book he held. "What's that?"

Adam restored it to its hiding place as he answered. "It's Mallory's diary. Most of it is drivel about how evil all Immortals are, based on his limited experience of one assignment." Adam smiled slightly. "A few entries about what a naive kid I must be to disagree with him." Adam's expression quickly sobered. "He hasn't written up today's activities yet, but I found some choice words about Ransley and Horton. Apparently he didn't get along with the other renegades very well."

Turning to face Amanda, Adam said, "I'm sure Duncan's fine." Adam hoped that his friend was fine. If Duncan MacLeod of the clan MacLeod was not, in fact, fine, Methos would make sure that Amanda never forgot how stupid she had been to leave him alone like that.

It had been another long day of meetings and arguments and Joe was tired and hungry as he got out of the cab. During the elevator ride up, he tried to decide if he

ought to order up room service or wait and eat with Adam. He came to the conclusion that since he didn't know whether Adam was going call or stop by or what time it would be, there wasn't much point in waiting.

Joe wasn't certain that Adam was finding time to eat while he was both hunting and hiding from the renegade Watchers, but making sure his Immortal friend remembered to feed himself wasn't Joe's responsibility. Besides, even though Adam didn't appear that remarkable, the Chronicles indicated that Methos was one of the most powerful Immortals alive. With his advanced metabolism, Adam could probably get away with running on little more than adrenaline for a couple of days.

Turning the corner of the hallway, Joe saw two men waiting in front of his room. Recognizing Harvey Ransley, he wondered what they could be doing here. There wasn't any logical way they could know that Joe knew what they were up to, since he had gotten most of the information from Adam's supposed corpse. Of course, Adam claimed that Mallory didn't always think logically. A new thought chilled Joe. What if they had found out that the Immortal Watcher wasn't actually a corpse, or worse, what if he now was one.

Spotting the new arrival to the hotel hallway, Harvey stepped forward smiling. Joe couldn't think of any reason for them to be here if they didn't, at least, suspect he knew about them, so he decided not to wait any longer. Joe turned and hurried back the way he had come as fast as his artificial legs could carry him.

It did little good. The able-bodied Watchers caught up to him in seconds. Stepping out in front of him, Harvey pointed a gun at Joe. "What do you know? The idiot was right about something, after all. You do know something." He held out his other hand. "Where's your key? I'd rather not discuss this in the hall, if you don't mind."

There was no sense of another Immortal as Amanda and Methos approached

the barge. That was not surprising since, if Duncan had been home, he would have answered the phone earlier. Still, it did little to ease their worry.

Parking the car, the two Immortals boarded the boat. Amanda stood on the empty deck. "His body's not here, so he must have woken up, but where is he now?"

"I don't know," Adam answered, staring out at the river. There was no way to tell whether or not a headless corpse had been recently disposed of here.

"Maybe Galan... No, he's probably still not talking to Duncan."

Adam looked at her questionly.

Amanda looked slightly embarrassed. "I tried to stop him, but Duncan got it into his head to tell Galan about you and the Watchers. Galan refused to believe in either and stormed out."

Adam nodded. MacLeod was not known for his discretion. The two Immortals stood in silence a moment before the elder one got an idea. "We could ask Joe."

Amanda brightened. "Of course, Duncan's Watcher will know where he is. How can we reach him?"

Joe probably wouldn't know where Duncan was, but he ought to know if Duncan was still alive. Ransley almost certainly would have called Joe if he had killed him. "It's late enough that he should be at his hotel by now. I said I'd contact him there, so he should be waiting for me anyway."

Pulling out the car keys, Amanda smiled. "Let's go."

The Immortal pair pulled into the hotel parking lot. As Amanda searched for an open space, one of the motionless vehicles caught Adam's eye. "Isn't that..."

Following his gaze, the younger Immortal nodded. "It looks like it could be."

She circled around for a better look. "The license plate number matches the one I was following."

The Immortals exchanged glances. Joe was in trouble. Amanda parked and both got out.

They walked outside where Adam looked up at the building. "Joe's in room 716. That should be just about there." He pointed out the window and Amanda nodded. "Meet you inside."

As Adam headed towards the entrance, Amanda asked, "Where are you going?"

The elder Immortal turned to look at her. "Room 716. We're going to surround them."

"I got that," Amanda said impatiently. "But we need to synchronize our watches so that we'll each know when the other is in place."

Methos had a much more accurate means of knowing when Amanda was in place, but he had no intention of explaining how acute his senses were to another Immortal. Besides, she wouldn't know when he was in place. He decided to humor her.

Harvey paced the hotel room in frustration. "This is your last chance to explain how you found out about us," he warned the figure on the bed. "If you don't, we're going to kill you." He waved his gun threateningly.

Mallory waved his own gun from the chair where he sat. "You can at least admit that you're the one who told MacLeod about us and Amanda about Pierson. We already know that much."

"I'm the one who told Amanda about Pierson." Everyone looked up to see Adam Pierson standing, framed by the open doorway. He carried no weapons and the way he leaned against the doorknob was almost casual, but something told them that

this was no quiet, unassuming researcher they were dealing with.

"You're dead! I shot you." Mallory was the first to speak. Nervously, he rose and tried to shoot Adam again.

The first shot merely knocked some plaster from the wall, but the second hit square in the chest. The impact knocked Adam into the wall and his hand left the doorknob. Everyone waited for him to fall, but instead he straightened up with a smile. "Bullet proof vests are wonderful things."

"No! That can't be it. I saw the blood. You weren't breathing." Nervously, Mallory backed towards the window, but stopped when he felt a steel point pressed against his back.

"Going somewhere?" the Immortal acrobat on the other end of the weapon asked sweetly.

Harvey dove for the hostage on the bed. Methos had his sword drawn in an instant, but he was a half second too late to stop him. Harvey already had his gun at Joe's head. "Drop the swords!" He glanced significantly at the one inches away from him, but added, "Both of you."

Tension filled the room at the new threat. Both Immortals looked at Harvey and he swallowed. "I mean it. One wrong move and he dies."

Methos hesitated. He wasn't so cold and heartless as to sit by while his friend was shot. On the other hand, he had no intention of sacrificing himself to save Joe. Maybe there was another way. Adam slowly lowered his sword, but kept a firm grip on the hilt. "If we were really the monsters you claim, why would we care what happens to him?" he asked cautiously, wondering if he might be able to reason with the man.

Harvey considered this, but his belief that all Immortals were innately evil was too deeply ingrained. However, some of them could be temporarily useful and an idea occurred to him. Harvey dropped Joe and took a couple of steps away from the bed,

keeping one eye and his gun pointed in that direction to prevent any sudden moves from the Watcher as he addressed the Immortal.

"You know, I think we could help each other. It would be much easier for me to find Immortals if I had a copy of your database. In return, I could make sure that your enemies were among my targets. If you wanted, you could even stand close enough to receive their Quickenings." The last part was dangerous and meant Harvey wouldn't be able to keep Adam long, but it was the surest way to win over an Immortal.

Adam shook his head. "Even if I still had the database, I couldn't allow you to use it to hunt Immortals."

"Why not?" Harvey demanded. "You think it's okay when you do it."

Adam sighed. "I kill other Immortals because I have to in order to survive, but I don't go seeking them out. You're not part of the Game. You shouldn't be killing us."

"So I'm supposed to sit back and let whomever wins dominate mankind? I can't do that!"

"Most of us don't want to dominate anybody. If your real worry is having an evil Immortal win the Prize, why do you seem to concentrate on killing good Immortals?"

"There are no good Immortals," Harvey insisted. Deciding that he was getting nowhere in this conversation, he aimed his gun at Adam. With no wall to support him this time, the Immortal toppled backwards from the impact of the bullet.

Amanda still had a hostage of her own. As Harvey turned to her, she met his gaze with a wicked smile. "I wouldn't try anything if I were you."

Harvey shot anyway, but his aim was off and he shattered the still open window instead.

"What is with you people?" Amanda asked, pushing Mallory out of her way, sending him sprawling to the floor. "And

you have the nerve to call us monsters?"

"You kill each other all the time," Harvey retaliated, firing another shot.

Amanda ducked on her way to the bed. "Not our friends," she protested.

Methos had risen to his feet and he ran Harvey through as the Watcher fired his third shot. The bullet lodged itself in the ceiling, causing plaster to rain down on the room.

Mallory was trying to crawl to the door, but Methos spotted him. "Stop him!" he ordered Amanda, who was closer.

The authority in the elder Immortal's tone was such that she obeyed almost without thinking about it. "Don't move," she commanded, placing the tip of her sword against his back.

Mallory flattened against the floor, in a futile attempt to get away from the weapon. "Please don't kill me," he begged. "I'll quit the Watchers. I'll never go near another Immortal as long as I live."

Amanda drew her eyes away from the pathetic figure to look questioning at Methos. The creep probably deserved to die, but she wasn't in the habit of killing helpless mortals. It was Methos's secret and based on the diary, he actually knew the guy. She'd let it be his call.

Methos looked from Amanda and Mallory to Joe. His fellow Immortal would probably understand if he wanted Mallory dead, but he wasn't certain his fellow Watcher could accept it as necessary. Self defense was one thing, but this felt a bit too much like murder. Adam sighed and turned back to Amanda. Mallory invoked more pity than hatred. Adam couldn't kill him. He hoped he could finally win their argument.

Adam sheathed his sword and waved Amanda towards the door as he approached Mallory. The frightened mortal scrambled away until he was sitting against the wall, pressing against it as if he thought he could melt through by trying hard enough. "I'm

sorry I killed you. Please don't hurt me. I'll do anything you want."

Seating himself in front of the younger man, Adam smiled. "Can we talk then?"

"Sure, anything you want," Mallory said nervously. "What do you want to talk about."

"How about Immortals?"

Mallory swallowed. "You're an Immortal, aren't you?"

Adam nodded. "But I'm not like Benoit."

"You're not?"

Adam shook his head. "Most Immortals aren't." He sighed. "In some ways I wish I'd given in to the little voice that said I ought to kill Benoit so that you could get a better assignment." Adam looked at Mallory. "But that's not what the Watcher records are for. The Watchers keep their records in order to preserve history. Using them to hunt Immortals is wrong, no matter who is doing it."

"The Watcher rules really mean that much to you, an Immortal?" Mallory asked, astonished.

Adam nodded. He felt extremely exposed admitting this with Amanda standing right there, but he hoped she was suspicious enough not to assume that every word he uttered was the absolute truth.

"But how...?" Mallory shook his head. "I must be a major disappointment to you."

"That depends."

"On?"

Adam smiled. "Whether or not you learn from your mistakes."

"Does that mean you're not going to kill me?" Mallory allowed himself a slight

glimmer of hope.

"Are you going to give me any reason to kill you?"

Mallory shook his head emphatically. "No. If you let me out of this room, I'll never go near any Watcher or Immortal ever again."

Adam smiled. "How about only once more?"

Mallory looked puzzled.

"If it's okay with you, I'll stop by tomorrow and help you set up a new identity that not even the Watchers will be able to trace."

Mallory nodded nervously.

Adam stood up. "Then you're free to go."

Mallory rose hesitantly, looking nervously around. Amanda moved out of the way, so she was no longer blocking the path to the door. As Mallory started taking a few timid steps, Adam added, "If I might ask a favor?"

The mortal froze in his tracks, looking back at the older man.

Adam smiled. "You probably need the cash more than I do, but bank and credit cards are a nuisance to replace."

Looking embarrassed, Mallory searched his pockets for the requested items. "Yeah, sure." Handing them to Adam, he added, "But I don't have your keys any more. I..." Mallory glanced at the dead body near the bed. He shivered and then bolted from the room.

Adam glanced at the body himself. "We're going to need to dispose of this," he said as he headed over to retrieve his keys.

"Adam?" Joe called softly and the Immortal looked up from where he knelt. "You're not even bleeding. I've never seen even other Immortals shrug bullets off that easily." Joe shook his head. "But if you

could, why did you let Mallory think you were dead?"

The oldest Immortal shrugged. "I wasn't wearing this then." Lifting up the bottom of his sweater, Adam revealed the recent purchase he wore underneath.

"But I thought..."

"Immortals don't wear bullet proof vests," Amanda finished, sounding only slightly more confident.

Dropping the sweater, Adam shrugged again. "I'm Immortal, not stupid. I haven't survived all this time by doing what people expected of me." Meeting Amanda's gaze, Methos added, "And neither have you."

Amanda suddenly realized that this man, this Immortal, that she had met only a week before, knew all about her while she knew only stories and half truths about him. Adam's access to the Watcher Chronicles, if used properly, could be as dangerous to his enemies as the millennia of experience he had as Methos.

Duncan paced nervously. "Where could she be? I should have stayed here and waited. She probably came back while I was gone and decided I was dead."

"I admit I only met Amanda two days ago, but I doubt she thinks you're dead," Galan said reasonably. "If she was looking for you, Amanda would have called Belladone. The manager knew you were there."

"She still should have been home by now. Who knows how much trouble she's out there getting into." Suddenly they sensed the approach of an Immortal and held their breaths, watching the stairs intently.

When Amanda appeared, Duncan let

his out in a rush. "Where have you been? I've been worried sick."

"She was with me," said the male Immortal entering the barge after the female one.

"Methos?" Duncan looked up at him. "Why didn't you ask me if you needed help?"

Adam shrugged. "I needed someone who could climb a wall."

"Climb a wall?" Duncan echoed. "What were you two up to?"

"We took care of everything. Don't worry about it." Adam turned to Galan. "But you're going to need a new roadie. Harvey Ransley won't be coming back." Adam sincerely hoped that Ransley was gone for good. Amanda's presence completely masked Ransley's faint one, even while he was still alive and Adam couldn't remove the mortal's head without arousing suspicion from his two companions.

Galan closely examined the newly arrived Immortal. "You're the one who claims to be Methos, the Watcher?"

The ancient Immortal stepped forward to shake hands. "I'm Adam Pierson. Methos is my Watcher assignment."

Galan brightened. "That's clever. You've gotten yourself assigned to follow someone who doesn't exist, so that he can never sense you."

Adam had no wish to explain the differences between researchers and field agents if he didn't have to. He smiled. "I thought getting assigned to Methos was pretty clever myself." Of course, he thought so for an entirely different reason.

Glancing significantly at Duncan, Galan smiled. "I can see how some people might get confused."

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CHAPTER. Ghosts in the Mist

Eclipse found herself back at home, standing in her own barn. How had she come here? She didn't remember. It didn't matter. She should have been out here far more often. How could she have forgotten? The horse's feed bins were long since empty, the horses unfed. The floor was filthy, not mucked out in weeks. How could she have forgotten? She could see all too sharply what the League would say if they found her. She couldn't even remember to take care of her pets. And yet she claimed she was a fit holder of the Heavensgate itself, the Namestone. She could see their faces. Accusing faces.

Where were her ponies? Snapdragon and Daffodil should be healthy, fed by acres of pasture. They lay against the wall, a wall futilely battered by their hooves, a wall through which they had been unable to escape, trapped here until they had starved. In death they lay on their sides, stomachs bloated, ribs gaunt, so she had to look into their faces. Accusing faces.

Why had they stayed? The barn was three-sided, most of the first floor open to the air. She whirled. Across the doorway, blocking the exit, stretched out across acres of pasture, waited her worst enemies. FedCorps. The Manjukuwan Ever-Victorious Army. Personae from every League that had lost members to the Maze. They stared through the doorway, visages hard as iron, waiting for her, appearances so frightening she had to turn from their faces. Accusing faces.

This was the final confrontation, the one from which she could neither run nor hide. Grimly, she called on her gifts, the shields and attacks that might, somehow, let her win free. Nothing happened. Screens -- defenses against explosions, against bullets, against mental attacks -- ignored her calls. The particle beam, her most potent attack, refused to ignite. There had been rumors, tales of a gift that suppressed all other gifts, stories she had ignored. Her mentors, those who had taught her once and again about the importance of preparedness, the importance of checking the truth of rumors: she could see their faces, shaking their heads, accusing her of error. Accusing faces.

She threw herself across the barn, scrambling for an innocuous toolchest. There waited a high-power automatic rifle. It was not enough to let her escape, but she might yet sell her life dearly. When, she asked herself, when had she oiled it or cleaned it or made sure it had the right ammunition? She couldn't remember. It all seemed so remote. She knew she'd made the arrange-

ment, but when or how? She couldn't remember. She must have lazed the winter away, not doing anything, while the neglected weapon rusted solid, rusting to the ruined mass she found. She could see RifleMaster himself, he who had taught her, glaring in her direction, disgusted by her neglect. She could see his face. His accusing face.

Already, the first members of FedCorps were on her. When gifts failed, when weapons failed, bare hands would still be there. She tried to come to a guard position, slowly, so slowly, so her attackers closed through her gestures, contemptuously dismissing her feeble moves with the looks on their faces. Accusing faces.

Accusing faces.

Accusing...

Eclipse slammed into awakesness, screens fully charged, every offense ready for her conscious call. Her leap from nightmare into the conscious world had swept her out of bed, so she floated inches above the bedroom floor, muscles tensed, gifts readied to counter any strike.

Strike? she asked herself. Strike? From what? No one is here. No one except you. No one except your own undermind. You know what's wrong. You read your own mind deep enough to know your own fears. This nightmare isn't the final revenge of the Lesser Maze. This is fear, pure and simple, fear of people and personae and governments every one of whom really does want to kill you, preferably slowly and painfully. This is fear of people who want to kill you because you risked your life to save them.

She shook her head. It was just too much. Sometimes the world was unfair, she knew, but the dreams were just too much. How often had she put her life and gifts on the line? The Lemurians invaded Canton; she fought at Ru-Shen. FedCorps prepared to crack the Lesser Maze; she did it first. Sky octopi ravaged Latin America; she stood unrecognized besides the Brazilian Persona Corps in their doomed effort to save Sao Paulo. The Fearless Four, whatever Comet and friends were calling themselves this week, had matched their wits against a pair of quasi-divine beings. She had gone along, taking the worst thrashing of her life in the Tunnels. All this, when a half year ago she had lived in her real home, with no responsibilities beyond being a good little girl and growing up into a good woman.

Had she done enough? Asking that question was being giftfalse. Being responsible to your gifts? That meant using them to their limit whenever they were needed, no matter the price. That standard told you: you do what you can, but you can never say: enough.

Aurora stirred uncomfortably in her sleep. Something pulled her away from summer beaches, water lapping against the sand, sunlight scattering from gentle swells. Eclipse was inside her dream, lulling her back into deep-dreaming sleep. In her dream, she clearly knew that she was asleep, but Eclipse was awake and inside the dream at the same time. Other times, the puzzlement might have awakened her; now the contrast seemed perfectly natural. Not in words, Eclipse let her know: Eclipse had had another nightmare, one that awoke Eclipse and might have awakened her, but now everything was fine. Eclipse did something at the margins of Aurora's thoughts, so Aurora ac-

cepted that Eclipse would disappear, leaving her on a sun-bright shore.

Upstairs, Eclipse recoiled, falling back on her pillow, briefly too strained to do more than stare at charcoal shadows thrown against grey-crepe backgrounds. Dream projection took finicky control and an utterly appalling depth of power. Working through Aurora's sleeping mind screens without waking her up would have been impossible without the assent of Aurora's undermind. Eclipse waited for the throbbing in her skull to subside, the nausea to fade in the cool night air. Dream projection was more trying than the nightmare that preceded it, but she hadn't had a choice. She had almost awakened Aurora, and Aurora owned her own sleep.

Days of blue skies and nights of clear, cold starlight had been replaced by dank clouds and a driving rain. Her garb was decidedly not waterproof. A body field would keep her dry, but drawing on gifts would frustrate the purpose of the walk. Eclipse slipped into sweatshirt, corduroys, sneakers, and mottled gray poncho, accepting that legs and feet were going to get soaked. Her walk on the beach, now a nightly habit, was shorter than most.

Her return to Pickering's home brought one surprise after another. The garden was faintly illuminated, a trail of pin-lights marking the path around Pickering's maze. Other lights shone in the breakfast room. The kitchen door was slightly ajar.

Pickering sat at his breakfast room table. A dish of cookies and a steaming carafe waited on the sideboard. "I thought you might like some herbal tea," he explained. "Nothing to keep you awake. Or do your gifts keep you warm?"

"I've taken pictures on Pluto, standing in methane snow, and not been chilled." Her defensiveness faded. "No. I'm only warm if I use them. Elsewise I get as cold as anyone else. I was trying to get away from my gifts, not be their slave."

Pickering poured her a mug of tea and set it in front of her. His hand brushed her cheek. "Would your pride be offended if I gave you a blanket? This was a raw night for a walk, even if you leave no footprints on my kitchen tile."

"Screens," she explained. "I pushed the water off my shoes before I came inside." Pickering held the blanket, gently folding it above her.

She stiffened. "I'm not used to people doing things for me. Not kind things. Not any more." She looked determinedly into the mug, briefly hiding her face. "I suppose you wouldn't know about that."

"There is no difficulty," answered a sympathetic Pickering. "None at all." Encountering no resistance, he finally draped her shoulders in the soft fabric.

Eclipse found herself at the verge of tears, sharp and hot as blood from a slashed artery, not knowing why. She clutched for her pants pocket, snatched out her handkerchief, and tried to pretend to blow her nose, almost masking her crying. In a minute it was over. "Sorry," she apologized. "I shouldn't drop my past on you."

"Eclipse, I know very little about your world. Let alone you. I hear bits of a story from different people with differ-

ent prejudices, so it is non-trivial to winnow truth from error. But you've been a charming house guest. And cleaned up after two almost-teen-age boys, no one saying a word about it. So why should you be surprised at minor kindnesses in return?" He nudged her upwards, swaddled her stomach and thighs in the blanket, and pushed her gently back into the chair.

"Thank you." She had to force the acknowledgement past clenched lips. "Are you asking my version of what I did?"

"Only so much as you may wish to tell," he answered. He slipped around the table to sit facing her.

Now Eclipse was deeply homesick, wishing that she were in her home, guesting Pickering in her own kitchen. She managed to speak. "You heard about the Name-stone. It could make imagination into reality, bring heaven to earth. It could actually change things into each other. I could've used it to pave streets with gold and make deserts into gardens. That's telekinesis. I did. A bit. Namestone could make criminals into honest men, bring people peace and contentment, now until the end of time. That's telepathy and mindlock. Maybe don't mention mindlock, GR?" cautioned Eclipse.

"Everyone knew what this Namestone promised. Thousands died trying to reach it?" inserted Pickering, giving her a chance to drink her tea. "It was hidden in a maze. A maze you solved. Having gained the Namestone, you kept it, to others' dismay."

"Close enough. Some parts of the Maze you could solve by being smart. Some places I used brute force. It allowed that. Sort of. You could be somewhat smart and somewhat tough, instead of all smart. You couldn't be all tough. I think. I think someone who was smart enough could have solved it by being very clever. The Great Maze is like that; you solve it by being clever and it only gives you things for yourself. I'm not that bright; a bunch of places in the Maze I solved by getting violent," she explained.

"One of our leading lights once asserted 'violence is the last refuge of the incompetent'. To which his critics added 'the competent having resorted to violence at previous instants, whilst hope yet remained of its successful application'," said Pickering.

"I earned the Namestone. I almost died, but I got it. I had to. If I hadn't, FedCorps would have it. They'd have used it to cram their utopia down everyone's throats. So I took it, and everyone knew I had it. The League of Nations had a big meeting, every President in the world, persona bodyguards, video nets, tesla ... They wanted me to give them the Namestone. I'd told them why not, but their computers proved I was wrong. Morally wrong. That's what they said," she explained.

"I went to Geneva," she continued, "I told them they couldn't have their toy. I told them to make their own utopia. By doing honest work with their own hands. That didn't go over. They had promised I could leave afterward. France tried breaking the promise. They lined up personae with telehypnosis, people with drains and dampers --- gifts that suppress other gifts. I'm not sure I was strong enough by myself, that soon after the Maze, to fight all those gifts. Not at once. So I pulled the Name-

stone. Did I use it? I'm not sure. It didn't matter. Some were afraid the Namestone would turn them into frogs. They ran. Some lay down on their stomachs to worship it. Or me. Mostly they got in each others' way. I marched out. Then I did a very long-range tele-port.

"The League went through the ceiling. They invented a new crime for me, even though every country voting for the crime, every single one, had a law in their constitution saying you can't make something a crime after you did it. The only big country voting no was Austria-Hungary. Foreigners had pestered Emperor Otto about human freedoms, when he had trouble with his parliament. He got his talk-backs. He told the American and French and Russian and Bavarian Ambassadors that Austria-Hungary was a civilized country, and no civilized country ever makes an ex post facto law. He quoted their own Constitutions at them. He also asked me not to move to his Empire; he didn't want a war.

"Manjukuo put a hundred tons of gold on me. France offered a lifetime loan of the Mona Lisa. Almost every country in the world put all their best computers and High Programmers and personae into finding me. They haven't. Yet. Before we left, they were searching the bottom of the Pacific for my secret base."

"I think," responded Pickering, "that what you did is less important than why. You're how old? And you risked your life. Why?"

"Twelve. Barely. Namestone was my birthday present to myself, a day late. Why?" she answered. "The Namestone. What it does is horrible. With the Grand Master --- the ruler of Tibet --- using it, everyone would have turned into machines. No hate. No fear. No anger, no passion. If you didn't like what was happening, you'd be unhappy. The Namestone stops unhappiness. By changing you until you're happy, if that's easier than changing what you're unhappy about. I kept that from happening." Her last sentence held a stubborn pride for her deed.

"I understand," said Pickering. "I'm more surprised that your friends don't agree. Are you people accustomed to obeying higher authorities without question?"

"I think our people didn't trust governments more than yours. But you (forgive me, Telzey, nothing personal) you don't trust computers the way we did. The League's computers proved the Namestone was morally perfect. That settled everything."

"I see," mumbled a bemused Pickering. The notion that her governments trusted moral decisions to digital computation was seriously alarming, or would have been, if their governments had ever existed. He helped himself to another chocolate sugar snap. "I want to know why you did it. Not why it had to be done, but why you -- twelve years, barely five feet, certainly not a hundred pounds, felt you personally had to challenge this Maze deathtrap. No one told you to, did they? So, why you?"

"Why me? I told you, didn't I? I said why Namestone was wicked." She wrinkled her brows. "Or did I? Oh, you mean, why me, not Comet or Starsong or the Screaming Skull?" She waited for Pickering's ac-

knowledge of her words. "I keep wanting to say 'of course I did'. But 'of course' is real rude. It's what you say to little children. It's not I think you're a small child. But usually it's children who ask very hard questions, questions you answer by of coursing them."

"Why you went. We're talking about something ingrained, aren't we? Something so obvious that you never doubt it?" asked Pickering.

"Let me explain? I have gifts. Flight. Mentalics. I had a choice. I could sit back, let FedCorps grab the Namestone, and watch them turn the world into Hell. I could grab the Namestone myself, because I could see clear and honest what would happen if I didn't. If I let them grab it, knowing what would happen, I'd be guilty of wrecking the world," she said.

"There is a distinction, presently, between sins of commission and sins of omission. Between evils you actively perform, and evils you fail to prevent. The former are said by some to be more serious," remarked Pickering.

"But I have gifts!" she said. "I don't have to spend my time looking for trouble. But lots of gifted people do, which is why the real United States had fewer murders last year than your Washington had this Winter. What if I saw someone about to murder you, and didn't stop him? Wasn't it just like I murdered you myself? Sitting and watching is doing something. If I don't do anything, knowing you're about to be murdered, I did something that meant you got murdered. Not using my gifts, when I have gifts and know they matter, that's as bad as doing the wicked things myself. Or worse. I know what's right and what's wrong. Your murderer may-haps didn't."

Pickering reached for another cookie. "I think I understand your point of view. Local children would say, they saw where you were coming from. You have gifts. You saw this horror swift approaching. A horror you could prevent. Perhaps even a horror most other people could not have prevented, you being, ummh, stronger? more gifted? smarter? than others?" Her cheeks, rosy from recovering warmth, reddened further. "So you stepped into the breach, put your own life at risk, because you could. Whether you absolutely had to or not: you could, so you did. Automatically. Because you do what's right. You didn't ask if someone else would do it. That didn't matter. And you expect everyone to act the same way."

"Got it! I saw what I had to do. I did it." Her smile was suddenly luminous. "I think others would have done it. If they saw why. Mayhaps if someone else started first, I'd've waited. Of course, if I met someone else doing the Maze for the same reason, we'd've helped each other."

"You would have felt guilty? If you didn't, I mean?" he asked.

"Guilty? Ashamed?" She took another lemon butter cookie. "You know, I found that when I was looking for personae. I looked for why people did good things. I thought I'd find memories, inspirations from seeing personae do the right thing, how great it feels to do what's right. That would've let me find personae --- hey, it sounded clever at the time. After all, that's why history is all about deeds of heroes and heroines. So people remember it feels good to do

right." She let Pickering think about her words. "I found people who felt guilty. I found people who were afraid. People who thought that doing wrong felt unbathed. I found people who'd do something wrong if they thought they could get away with it." A quarter cup of honey-lemon tea disappeared in one swallow. "I found people who thought like Lemurians, only caring about themselves, only real toned down, not black and white like a Lemurian but gray-shaded. I found people who thought they'd always get away with everything. But almost never did I find someone who did right because she liked doing it."

"You do things because they make you feel good? Not because you feel bad if you don't?" probed Pickering.

"Well, mostly," Eclipse shrugged. "Holding the Namestone, knowing I'd done it, saved the world from itself? That was great. Absolutely incredible! Like nothing else you can imagine. You're half-right, though. I wouldn't want someone asking me why I didn't use my gifts, when I could have."

"You aren't bothered that people say you're wrong?" asked Pickering.

"Why? of course not! Not at all. I used my gifts. As deep as I could call them," she answered happily. "What I did with the Namestone, that was right and wrong. I say right. They say wrong. There are more of them than me. That doesn't prove anything. Right isn't counting. Everyone knows that. Well, everyone used to know that."

"I think you're right," answered Pickering. "Some might demur. America, my America, tends to browbeat its girls until they're no longer brave or clear sightedly honest or firmly moral, until they're women who prefer consensus to justice. Your parents," immediately he'd spoken the word, he regretted uttering it, "whoever, clearly did a better job."

She wilted into herself, the blanket's warmth and late night exhaustion finally taking their toll. Her thanks came as a choked whisper.

The gentle rattle of porcelain against porcelain crossed Pickering's garden. The day was silvery bright, the air still touched with the tang of last night's chill rain. Comet and Eclipse sipped at their post-breakfast tea. Star and Cloud were off to the library, Star half-willingly agreeing to help Cloud with his newspaper search. Aurora announced that she was a Games Mistress, or as close as one came locally, so she would look for clues from chess, territories, and stones, at least until someone gave her a better target. Star turned up his nose. Aurora had spent half of yesterday looking for the telepaths she knew, calling the full depth of her gifts and finding no trace of any of them.

"I almost woke Aurora last night," apologized Eclipse. "Again. I had another nightmare. I don't know how to tell her I'm sorry. I spoke to her this morning. I sound like someone pretending to be polite."

"She doesn't mind. I wouldn't. I mean everyone gets nightmares now and then when they do something terrifying, and what you did was a lot more horrifying than anything me or Star or Aurora's ever done, except mayhaps when Aurora watched the Brazilians all die, so you don't have to apol-

ogize; Aurora's used to being with Star or me when we have nightmares after what we've done," answered Comet. "After DeathMaster I woke up every night for a week and Aurora was always there or I would have started crying and scared my parents and they might have figured out I've got a public persona and they'd have been parents worrying about me and not thinking about being gifttrue. We try to do the same for Aurora, except she's the telepath so we can't tell something's wrong with her."

"I guess I'm spoiled," said Eclipse. "At home, I can wake up screaming. I can turn on all the lights and read until everything is all right. If I sleep until noon afterwards, mayhaps I should feel bad about sleeping so late, but it's the right amount of sleep. Here I have to be quiet. Or go for a walk. You pay Aurora back, being there when she has her nightmares, the same way she's there for you. How do I pay her back?" Comet shrugged. Eclipse looked wistfully across lawn and flower beds. She didn't usually make herself a burden on people by living with them, let alone by ruining their sleep every night. She'd attached herself to the Greater Medford League; becoming a burden on them was part of the price she paid. On the other hand, when she lived by herself meals were cooked because she cooked them. Dishes were washed, lessons were completed, shelves were measured and cut and painted, because she did the work. Living alone had its own price.

"Don't," said Comet. "You do so much now. Have you found hints?" She listened thoughtfully to Eclipse's negative explanation.

"Star sounded hopeful," said Comet. Last night, her younger brother had located a medicine smuggler. Star had decided that tracking smugglers could be complicated if local grownups got in the way. After all, local grownups didn't know what a persona was, so they would treat Cloud and Aurora like children. Very early that morning Cloud and Aurora disappeared to survey the Table Rock city jail, returning with a story told in Pickering's absence.

The town police station held a four-cell lockup, designed primarily to accommodate the occasional drunk or car thief awaiting transport to the county seat. The presence of Table Rock's sole reputed drug dealer had provoked a burst of security precautions, motivated partly by the fear that the prisoner might escape and partly by a desire to impress the town newspaper with the professional competency of the town constables. Aurora's unseen reconnaissance revealed a pair of patrolmen and a dispatcher on duty inside the station, and another plainclothesman covering the jail from the opposite roof. She decided that getting close enough to the jail to be sure of reading the right mind looked tricky.

With Cloud disguising them as a patch of grey haze against a grey sky, the two descended swiftly into a church tower, then waited tensely. No one came bounding up the stairs. No one had seen them. Aurora summoned her gifts. She told herself

she was doing something perfectly safe, because there were no telepaths any more to catch her. It was even legal, there being no laws regulating telepathy. Still, reading the mind of a chance-met soul on the streets was wrong. Only the prisoner, who had forfeited his civil rights by rejecting society, was her legitimate target. A difficulty occurred to her: if there were no telepaths now, the bailiffs had no way to know that the prisoner was guilty. He might be innocent, in which case she was reading the mind of an innocent man. She justified her acts by telling herself that if he were innocent she'd free him.

A few seconds in the thickets of the prisoner's consciousness relieved her of that worry. He was a medicine smuggler and a habitual thief, a man who routinely assaulted others, and at least once had left someone for dead, making him an unsuccessful murderer. To Aurora's prim image of the world, he was grossly dysfunctional. Not insane: she had read the minds of people with diseases of the mind, and he was not diseased. He just had no sense of his community, of his future, of anything except himself, his present, and his chances for stealing wealth others had created. She wondered how long it would take Pickering's people to deal with him in a civilized manner. The smuggler had no fear of the gallows he obviously would soon be facing.

She sorted through his memories. Here were his suppliers, the men who sold him the illicit medicine that his customers craved. Here was a list of places the suppliers could be found. She noted his customers. If the trio couldn't find his wholesaler, his customers knew another retailer. Finally, disgusted, she withdrew from his thoughts, wishing she could forget his sordid criminality. DeathMaster had had grandiose schemes for exalting his image of the virtuous life, schemes that incidentally would have decimated the world's population. This liquor-sodden wreck of a criminal mind was lucky he could remember where he lived.

The sinking sun set shadows across Pickering's garden. Aurora had spent the afternoon in the library, skimming volume after volume on chess and other games. Someplace the people who changed the world must have made a mistake, a mistake only she could find. Star and Cloud finally returned from an afternoon of playing catch-ball, Cloud leaving again to the town library.

"I found a hint," announced Aurora. "In a chess manual."

"Chess?" grumbled Star. "What sort of hints can you get from chess?"

"e4. d6. An opening. Pawn to king's fourth. Pawn to queen's third. It's named the Pirc Defense," she explained.

Star thought for a few moments. "Sure. I watched you play that at the Christmas Day tourney, when you won every game. Didn't I?" His sister blushed. "Wait! That's not its name."

"Right. When I played it, e4 d6 began the Glorious

Shield of Sarnath. Now it's named after a person. Pirc is a historical GamesMaster. Someone whose sketch they printed. It took me an hour to see it. Chess is a (new) game here. It didn't get all its rules until a hundred years ago. I even found this crazy chapter saying KBBkn is a draw, when everyone in Atlantis knew it's mostly a win."

"That's silly. Chess was played in Atlantis." Star caught the error in his logic. "There's no Atlantis any more. So chess is new? They're inventing moves?"

"You have it!" Aurora was momentarily proud of her brother, who really was sharp, especially considering that he was a boy. "Alex has this book. Great players of the nineteenth century. There was this American called Morphy. His great idea? Winning all sorts of games against European champions? Develop pieces. Don't randomly attack."

"Move your pieces out fast? That's a great idea? Even I know that," sneered Star.

"You do. His opponents didn't. His opponents were hintless. I could beat them. Easy," she smirked. "Except Staunton, I think. He was modern, by standards now."

"How's that a hint?" he asked.

"Well," she hesitated. She'd been more interested in how her favorite game had changed than in what the changes meant. "Chess is prehistoric. Like territories or stones. Every ancient civilization that matters played it. If it's new here, that's all ancient time changed."

"I guess." Star made himself try to sound sympathetic.

"So the change had to be a very long time ago," said Aurora. "Before anything else. Mayhaps it's not a great hint. Except if I can find an article calling 1. e4 c5 the Old Atlanticean opening, I've found a mistake someone made, changing the world. If there was no Atlanticea, there's no Atlanticean opening."

"You're ahead of me." He tried to reassure his sister, who'd been so proud of what she found. "Now we know where to look." He made a fist. "Right. We look back more than hundreds of years ago. To a thousand years ago. When no one knows what happened."

"Pickering does," said Aurora. "I found a child's history book, and whoever wrote it believed every word. He believed he knew what happened even five thousand years ago."

"That's impossible. He can't know that. People's brains worked different back then. Besides, we don't know what actually happened back then, before history was changed. Good history is hero stories, not silly facts," wailed Star. "Is that all you found? In a whole day?"

"Oh," she confessed, "I found something else. From all the books. Something simple. Punctuation. I checked with Telzey. She knows typefaces. There's no punctuation marks any more. Almost."

"Punctuation? Periods and commas and eleven other things?" wondered Star.

"No eleven other things. No more. Periods and commas and semicolons and colons. But no sardonique." She sketched on the table the ancient Atlanticean glyph (8\^)

denoting sarcasm. "No benesalutatore '(:-))'. No way to show how you feel. Only pick your words right," she explained. They both wondered why anyone would destroy English grammar.

"The other sort-of hint I found was better. Cats," she announced confidently.

"What about cats?" Star wondered whether his sister would notice anything except her current enthusiasms.

"They don't nest. At all. I looked north, way north, where it's still very cold. I tried looking down alleys and dumpsters. After all, they're dirty, so no one's going to want to look there. Whoever changed the world might have been careless and left a scrap of newspaper. A wanted poster."

"That makes some sense," admitted Star. Aurora was real smart, even if she was a girl. She was smart enough that he could be proud of having her for his twin sister, even if she did beat him at City of Steel all the time.

"I looked. I found this momma cat, nursing kittens. Young kittens, not two weeks old. It was a shed behind a garage, back in a corner, someplace people never went. The kittens were lying on the ground out of sight behind old window frames. No cover or anything. You could tell they were cold from how hungry they were."

"No nest?" wondered Star. "None at all? Why? It doesn't make sense. All outside cats nest. I mean, if I were the League of Terror and Injustice, I'd want to get rid of personas, so no one could stop me. But why did someone hate cats enough to make them dumb? Dumber than birds, even."

"Eclipse will solve it," said Aurora confidently. "She solved the Maze. She can solve anything. I know she can."

The Magpie's Roost was a seldom-patronized roadhouse located a few miles north of Centerville. A confluence of gravelled roads gave the tavern a variety of approaches. Ill-tended evergreens and a battered, sinking wooden fence obscured the view from its parking lot, so that no one outside the property could easily learn who frequented the place. The second floor with its private entrances had once been a respectable inn, declining with passing years to the status of a sleepeasy, and was now the place of work of Marcus Salvatore, distinguished leader of Center County's criminal community. An abbreviated stay in one of America's premier universities had affected his speech, though not his morals. To his confidants he said he was not a pusher but an illicit purveyor of controlled narcotic substances. Extreme discretion, coupled with reservation of several well-decorated, clean front rooms for certain officials and their very close friends, had rendered his place of work virtually invisible to the constabulary.

The Greater Medford Persona League watched the Nest from nearby trees. The four were fully garbed, dominos in place, gloves covering freshly washed hands. They'd left Eclipse with Pickering. After all, the recognized League was the four of them. They were the four with law enforcement authority. The roadhouse's owners had thoughtfully provided a great deal of privacy for their clientele, but those provisions had not allowed for visitors who flew, let alone visi-

tors who could read the minds of the Magpie's clients. Fencing and evergreens did not obstruct the view of someone in a tree 70 feet off the ground.

"How are we doing?" whispered Star. They knew who they were looking for; all they had to do was to trap him at his work. Star wondered about the why of the laws he was enforcing. They didn't make sense, though he was more puzzled about why people wanted to break the law in question than why the acts were illegal. He hoped that the locals would approve of personas enforcing their strange code of justice. Still, smuggled medicine was illegal. Even though the laws were obviously dumber than the Rectification that personae had died enforcing, it was his duty to enforce them, even if Pickering always referred to Rectification as the Insane War on Drugs.

"Not yet," grumbled Aurora. He'd asked the same question five times in ten minutes. She was waiting for someone to open a door, raise a window-shade, or come outside. The outer walls of the building were mentally inert. She could follow line-of-light through an open window or unstopped chimney, reading the minds of things she encountered on the way, but the drapes and blinds for key rooms were pulled tight. For all that she could locate a familiar mind in the dark, searching for a stranger's mind through obstacles was close to impossible.

Comet saw thermal handprints on the back door. Someone had recently entered. Aurora needed someone to come outside, or someone inside to make a mistake so that she could scan within. Making an arrest would be very obvious. If they went into the building and their target wasn't there, the target would learn that a persona league was hunting him, and would go into hiding.

Minutes dragged into an hour. Star and Comet set up a chess board and played quietly. Cloud worked his lesson comp. Aurora tried to ignore them. At least Star hadn't decided that he was hungry. She'd looked for snack food in the local store. She couldn't believe how much chocolate the locals laced into their foods, down to store-chocolated milk for breakfast. Trail bars were fine. She'd neglected to tell the gang that the grocery store stocked bars of solid milkfat chocolate that you were supposed to eat all in a piece. She'd even seen someone eating one. In public! Unbelievable! No wonder these people were such feeble chess players.

Cloud nudged her. She'd looked away for an instant, and now the door was shutting. Her gifts lanced through the shadows, past the closing door, locking on the minds inside. One, two, three, ... she'd lost her chance on the rest. She tagged the minds she'd found, then switched to the outside, sweeping through the thoughts of the person leaving the building. The target was thinking only about the package she was carrying, half a kilogram of white powder. Her memory of the seller was the person the quartet sought.

Aurora switched back to the closed building, surveying the minds of the people she'd found. Two

were non-entities, men of minimal intelligence hired as bodyguards. She whispered a weapons list to Cloud. The guards watched the property's perimeter, but were forbidden line-of-sight on the entrance. They saw approaching cars, never approaching faces. The third person was their target's banker, a man who kept seas of numbers in his head and tightly coded files. The banker knew numbers, but not people. Thirty Nine might owe the boss sixty thousand dollars, but the banker did not know who Thirty Nine was. The boss, however, was now seated not ten feet in front of his banker, running down a new list of transactions.

"Got him," Aurora announced tonelessly. The transfer to the boss's mind was difficult, but accomplished. The mind she searched was indeed the wholesaler named by the first smuggler, someone who smuggled strange medicines in large lots. Aurora uploaded his mental map of the inn and passed it to the rest of the group. Their plan of attack was now complete.

Comet's flight field wrapped her friends in invisibility. She dropped Aurora into the woods a half-mile away, safely out of lines of fire. The others landed in the parking lot. Cloud's best kick slammed into the rear door. It crashed from its hinges to bang flat on a vestibule carpet.

The three advanced at a near-run. Guards called back and forth. They had heard a noise. What had caused it? The carpeting on the stairs was new. Walls were freshly plastered and painted bone-white. The quiet cleanness of this place contrasted vividly with the unwashed windows and aging window shades seen from outside. Aurora's mental images pointed the way. Star padded up the stairs, his companions hovering above the treads.

At the top of the stairs was another locked door. Cloud pushed through the latch and shoved the panel open. The three crowded through the doorway. Two men inside stared in shock.

"You're both under arrest," announced Cloud.

"I'm what?" snapped Salvatore, his walrus-spread of mustache quivering. "Arrest? You're too late for Halloween. Is this a practical joke?" Salvatore told himself this had to be a really tasteless stunt by some of his customers, that a trio of ten-year-olds had not just blasted the locked door of his office and threatened to take him into custody. The clothing said 'jape'. The fellow doing the talking was merely colorful, but his sidekick wore a private light show, while the third was buried in enough diaphanous-green veils to stock a sultan's harem.

"I said, you're under arrest," repeated Cloud. "Raise your hands and come quietly."

Salvatore's banker tried sneaking around the three and out the door. If this was some sort of a joke, it had to be on the boss. If it wasn't a joke, the boss would handle it. He had not expected Cloud to grab him, casually plant one fist in his stomach, and toss him retching onto a settee.

"Holy Mother of God!" exclaimed Salvatore. "I don't care who you are, you don't punch out an old man. Benito! Guido! Take these three outside. Give them

the thrashing of their life!"

Benito and Guido were the codes for Salvatore's two squads of enforcers. None of them had ever come closer to Italy than the local pizzeria. Their jobs were conditioned on satisfying the boss's eccentric whims, almost all of whom were boringly legal. When the boss's call came, a few had been inspecting the remnants of the back door, whose steel frame and core were supposed to prevent rapid entry. The rest were scattered around the building idling away their time, confident that their services would not be needed.

The stairway resounded to the beat of running feet. Cloud moved to face the guards, trusting Star and Comet to cover his back. The first villain reached the head of the stairs to be met with one of Cloud's kicks. The guard sailed backward, a flurry of bumps and thuds marking a half-dozen men falling down a flight of stairs to pile in a heap at the bottom. Cloud winced at the language the men were using. They shouldn't use words like that, he thought. If nothing else, there was a woman --- well, a girl, Comet being twelve --- in earshot.

"Move it!" screamed Salvatore. "Get up here! This instant!" He could hear shouts as his men untangled themselves, put themselves shoulder to shoulder, and pounded up the stairs again.

Two men reached the landing, one spreading out to each side to make way for the pair of men behind them. "Now!" shouted a fifth, the four throwing themselves across the landing at Cloud. To their surprise, the boy neither flinched nor ran. Instead, he lunged forwards, grabbed the nearest guard by his lapels, and tossed him head over heels at his compatriots.

Salvatore winced as two guards collided, rolled over the banister, and dropped out of sight. A loud crunch marked the other guards slamming into Cloud and, impossibly, failing to knock the boy off his feet. Instead, when he lifted, they went up, so neither guard touched the ground. Cloud's firm heave sent the two guards up at the ceiling; they ricocheted across the landing, bounced off the further wall, and slid down the risers toward the ground floor.

Salvatore decided that the situation was totally out of hand. What was wrong with his guards, whom he had salaried and fed and clothed? By now they should have had these three bound, gagged, and flayed alive. Instead the fellow in blue was thumbing his nose, daring them to try the stairs.

Salvatore pulled a pistol from his desk drawer. He knew his customers, knew the faces of their children. It was an excellent insurance policy. These three weren't children of anyone he knew. They didn't dress like children of anyone he knew. Worse, they apparently had learned martial arts from late-night ninja flicks. One of those skills, though, was surely not 'bulletproof'. The staccato bark of his heavy-duty handgun drowned out all other noise. Four rounds were for the back of the kid with the mouth, four were for his friend with the light-show, and four were for the green one.

To Salvatore's intense surprise, nothing happened. He

didn't practice as much as he said he did, but he was not ten feet from his targets. The first rounds might as well have been blanks. The second cluster of shots created sparks and puffs of smoke at their target. The third cluster knocked the green figure back a few feet.

Salvatore fumbled for another magazine. A clump and clatter was his guards, again reaching the landing and again being thrown bodily down the stairs. The green blur solidified into a masked girl, copper-blond hair combed in neat falls, who set four bullets down on his desk. "You dropped these," she said. "You should be more polite. The noise could annoy your neighbors." Salvatore told himself that she couldn't possibly catch bullets in midair, that the bullets now on his desk had to have been in her pockets all along.

He played for time. "Okay, what will it take?" he asked. "Money? A cut of the business? You want some powder? Real hot stuff? The best there is, guaranteed." Salvatore had no intent of honoring his offer. In only a few moments, the fools downstairs would get themselves organized, break out the iron, and retire with extreme prejudice three under-age perps.

"Cloud already told you," Comet explained politely, "he's here to arrest you. That's all."

"All?!" moaned Salvatore, slamming another magazine into his pistol. He leaned back and brought up his weapon. His target faded to a green blur. At a range of three feet, every shot missed.

From downstairs came a fusillade from pistols, rifles, and a pair of illegally-converted automatics. Cloud stood in the doorway, not flinching or ducking. There were shouts of pain. All became quiet. Salvatore's remote monitor, finally warmed up, relayed a picture from a hidden camera. His men lay in the vestibule, their weapons scattered across the floor.

Salvatore reached slowly into his desk drawer, cautiously withdrawing a plastic sack the size of a box of sugar. A razor cut surreptitiously slit the seals.

"Little girl?" he asked, "I have a present for you. A peace offering." Comet paused, a questioning look on her face. "Here." Holding his breath, Salvatore tossed half a kilo of uncut cocaine powder at her face.

Star saw a shower of white dust engulf his momentarily hesitating sister. She gasped a half-word question and collapsed motionless to the carpet. Her mind dropped out of the network Aurora had created. Star's body fields soared to maximum intensity, so that he burned like a miniature sun, his light drowning out all other shadows. Only Aurora's mental shriek stopped him from reducing Salvatore and his entire headquarters to ash.

Salvatore hesitated. The fellow in the light show costume stood in the middle of a cloud of cocaine, seemingly unaffected by the narcotic. The costume included a laser display, Salvatore noted, directed by the fingers. A crash and sudden burst of sunlight marked the outer wall of the building falling to earth behind him, risers and joiners slashed by Star's attack.

Fierce gusts of wind scoured the room, sending papers flying in every direction, half lifting Comet's inert body from the carpet, blowing a fortune in illicit narcotics into the open

air. The two boys knelt intently over the girl. He aimed his pistol. He still had a few rounds left. Now he had them. They weren't looking up, weren't moving. He couldn't possibly miss. Now they would surely die.

No. The voice had no direction, no apparent source. *No. They're not yours. You're mine. No one does that to my sister!* The voice echoed through Salvatore's mind, cold and inexorable as glacial ice. Salvatore saw before himself a gleaming pyramid within which waited a lidless, merciless, all-knowing eye. He tried to mouth another curse, denying the impossibility that the fates had prepared for him, but found himself mute. He could see what the eye revealed to him. It was too late to tell his visitors to go to Hell. He was already there. His sanity flickered, a guttering candle in a storm.

Minutes later, Salvatore and his banker lay unconscious on the floor. A shaky Comet, her garb sweatstained, leaned back against Salvatore's desk. Cloud, one arm propping her shoulders, helped her drink. The simple glass of water was overwhelmingly refreshing.

I found what we wanted, announced Aurora. *None of them remember us clearly any more. They only remember shadows. And ghosts.* She showed the mesh of Salvatore's memories: friends, contacts, sources, cash flows. *Cloud, try to stop being pig-headed. I can't talk so fast when I have to shout at you. You guys want more facts?* Aurora paused. She'd pushed herself so hard the space behind her ears hurt. Eclipse, she decided, made everything look so easy. For Aurora, finding the right memories, not a hundred others, had been a struggle.

"So I hand these two to bailiffs?" asked Cloud. "It's their laws, but your proof." Comet nodded politely. Her hands were still shaking. She knew she should have kept her guard up, but even after a year of doing a public persona talking, breathing, and being polite to criminals were still completely natural. She hoped the last behavior stayed that way.

"Guys?" asked Star. "They don't have mindreading here? Right? So Aurora walks into the courtroom. No one knows her. No one believes her. They just see a ten-year-old"

ELEVEN! ELEVEN! reminded Aurora.

"GIRL. They won't believe her," Star continued.

At least I'm not a BOY! Never anyone'd believe you! riposted Aurora.

"I asked Alex about telepathy," said Cloud. "He thought a long time. He asked Telzey questions and found the precedent. Three hundred years old. In Massachusetts there were women --- I think a witch is a type of persona and we should remember to look that up --- who got convicted with spectral testimony. Spectral is telepathy with funny realizing."

"Realization," Comet corrected under her breath.

"And finally the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts said spectral wasn't admissible. Because you couldn't tell if the spectre --- the realizing --- is from God or the Adversary," finished Cloud. He

hoped no one would ask him how a Court could possibly think mentalic evidence had a theological component.

Comet crossed the air in front of herself. "Evidence from the Adversary? Here? So no telepathy in Court? What do we do?" she asked. They couldn't just let Salvadore escape. Could they? They were in a quandary. Before the change, there were people who'd said Star and Aurora should go home and wait until they were older, before they did public personas, but they'd never had anyone refuse to believe Aurora's mentalic evidence. Now they faced with bailiffs and justices who'd never heard of telepathy.

"I know!" said Star. "I've got it! Owning this medicine stuff --- poison, more like, what it did to you, Comet --- is a crime. Let's tie them up, take a pile of their medicine, a little of money, and all those papers. Leave them on top of a bailiffwick. Call the bailiffs, tell them look on their own roof." The others looked for a hole in Star's plan. Salvadore couldn't remember them, not after Aurora had finished scrambling his mind. There'd be no inconvenient questions from people who didn't have the persona concept and couldn't understand that the four had done their legal duty. Salvadore would face the bailiffs, and they'd be on their way. [406B]

MINUTEGRARLS

Chapter 2

APRIL 16, 2174

AZORES CONVENTION NEGOTIATION FACILITY
AZORES NEUTRAL ZONE

A Boeing 747, "The United States of America" lovingly handstencilled on her antique fuselage, taxied to a halt at runway's end. Ambassador Rafael Keithley smiled at the rest of his delegation. The Azores Convention prescribed every detail of a negotiating session, down to the aircraft and flight path each delegation would use to reach Terceira. 130 years ago, that exactitude had appeared mandatory. Now it gave employment to the small group of professional hobbyists who kept alive the ancient art of jet aircraft manufacture.

Keithley launched into his formal remarks to his party, either of whom could have recited the boilerplate without an instant's hesitation. They had long since agreed that adherence to an exact routine gave them the tranquility of mind and fixedness of purpose they needed to complete their duties. "Notwithstanding that we have been doing this, the three of us, for the past century, I note for the record the circumstances of this session.

"Yesterday the European barbarians called for a special meeting of the Azores Negotiations Commission, as specified under Article 100 of the Azores Convention. This is to be a two-party session, ourselves and the EU. The neutral observers as chosen by lot in the current cycle are from the Schechuan Democratic

Republic and the Javanese Empire. The Europeans deviated from their usual practice by correctly reminding us that Article 37 provides that the choice of delegates is solely made by delegation's own nation, and that ambassadors of other powers could be included in a delegation.

"If they want to send the Butcher of Lowell -- allowing she's not dead of old age -- they are entitled to do so, and we are to receive her with the respect due any Ambassador.

"The stated topics of the special meeting, as provided by the European Union in advance of the session, are alleged American violations of Article 357 of the Treaty, alleged American violations of Article 5 of the Treaty, and under Article 599 a desire to consult on issues of mutual security. As you will recall, under Article 357 we allowed the Europeans to have exclusive use of the Moon, Mars, most of the asteroid belt, and the Sol hyperspace net, while we were granted control of Mercury, Venus, the Kuiper belt, and the four gas giants and their moons. Article 5 is the cease-fire statement. Article 599, permitting negotiations on topics of common defense, is widely viewed as a private joke whose meaning will eventually be explained by its authors.

"The Europeans called the meeting, so we will be the first to announce ourselves. The neutral delegates will, as usual, maintain full tapes of the session. Final check, gentlemen?"

The three delegates stood and. Each walked slowly around the other two, making a final check for fragments of lint, or other deviations from sartorial perfection. They nodded approval to each other.

"As the ambassadorial golf cart has been offloaded, we are ready to proceed." Keithley waited while his subordinates preceded him down the gangway. He took on faith that a few hundred yards away, entirely out of his line of sight, a European delegation was similarly preparing itself.

* * * * *

Every Azores session opened the same way. Each delegation had a long, green baize table, three chairs, each chair with matching pad of paper, two sharpened pencils, pitcher of water, and drinking glass. Two neutral delegates sat in the far corners of the European side of the room. At a chime, doors at opposite ends of the room slid open; the two delegations filed in. The lighting was so arranged that the armor-glass partition splitting the room in twain was not readily apparent.

Americans wore black suits and white cummerbunds with black tie. Kiethley stared at the Europeans. Regency Revival was the latest fashion on the wrong side of the Atlantic. The two senior EU delegates sported at least five major colors, not counting various neckerchiefs. The third European delegate seemed unlikely to be either European or human. A voice whispered in his ears. The cerebral override had held his face in a bland smile, kept his eyes flicking from point to point around the room, and stored the third delegate's image for his contemplation.

Keithley wondered how his superiors would respond to his written report that the final European delegate was a giant cat, legs broken and re-fused so the creature could

stand erect. Why, though, had the creature's knees been fused backwards, so it walked like a turkey, clawed feet extending forward while knees bent back? The body fur was orange long-hair tiger-stripes. Could it therefore be assumed to be male? How had the Europeans made him? Biosculpting? And why?

The six delegates took their places. The Europeans had called the meeting, so the Americans opened: "I am the American Delegate." "I am the American Associate Delegate." "I am the American Junior Delegate." During the truce negotiations, no representative of the Popular Army had ever spoken his name, a custom maintained by American diplomatic delegations to this day. The Europeans, correspondingly, refused to identify themselves to anonymous foreigners while negotiations were in progress.

The European Union chief delegate took the floor. "The European Union recalls a specific American commitment under Article 387 of the Azores Convention that the United States of America has no interest in and will not attempt to use the Sol hyperspace net. The European Union is concerned that, contrary to its treaty commitments, the United States of America has established a substantial interstellar colony at hypergrid location 013-020-R017. The European Union notes that the United States has violated the Azores Convention by using the Sol hyperspace net, presumably via an undeclared node linkage -- a further violation of the Convention. The European Union recalls the general commitment of each party under the Azores Convention that each party will undertake to undo any advantages gained consequent to its own violations of the operating sections of the Azores Convention. The European Union inquires as to how the United States of America proposes to undo the advantage of having used the hyperspace net to establish an interstellar colony in violation of the Azores Convention."

The American delegate responded with only slight hesitation: "Under Article 387 the United States of America has undertaken not to make use of the hyperspace net described and mapped or partially mapped by the European Union, except by prior agreement with the European Union. To this delegate's knowledge, no such usage has been requested, nor has it occurred. Therefore, to this delegate's knowledge, no violation of Article 387 has occurred. I shall, of course, inquire with New Washington. This delegate would note that he does not recall having yet heard any evidence of a violation of this Article, which refers exclusively to the use of the European hyperspace net, and does not to the delegate's recollection restrict locations in which Americans are free to live or travel."

From the flickers on their faces, the Europeans did not appear to have anticipated the American response. Relations between the two powers were at best stiffly correct, their limited success being based on an understanding that one might tell the truth or remain silent, but not lie to the other party. The Senior European delegate finally responded, "It is, I believe, well-known that it is impossible to establish large interstellar colonies -- as opposed to astronomic or planetographic observatories -- without recourse to hyperspace. The presence of a very large American colony at the cited location --- data will be supplied support-

ing this claim --- would appear to be prima facie evidence that Americans have indeed traveled by our hyperspace net, and are therefore in violation of the Azores Convention."

There was a period of silence. "Pray tell," asked the American Junior delegate, "for those of us who have not memorized the European net, which after all Americans have no interest in using, just where is the node location you quoted? It's real space location, I mean. The location is in this continuum, isn't it?" Keithley nodded affirmatively.

Now it was the Europeans' turn to hesitate. To EU interstellar fleets, the only interesting distances were those measured along hypernets. Where was the star system in question? The furry European finally spoke: "Approximately four light years -- in your years -- from here. If need be, I can have its name determined using your astrographic nomenclature.."

The senior American delegate glanced at his comrades. Astrography was not the strong point of his education, but 'four light years' was a number bearing historical magic. Had the Europeans just noticed Lincoln? "I thank the European Union delegation for raising with the American delegation a novel and interesting issue. I look forward to receiving the supporting evidence from the European delegation. If the facts were precisely as the European delegation has construed them, including the assertion that Americans have made use of the hyperspace net, it might indeed be the case that the terms of the Azores Treaty have not precisely been complied with. I can assure the European delegation that there is no American intent, known to me, not to comply with the Azores Convention. In particular, if it were purely hypothetically to be the case that we have doubtless inadvertently violated the Azores Convention, we are undoubtedly prepared to make appropriate compensation. I shall refer these issues to New Washington for a prompt and appropriate response."

"Noted," responded the European Chief Delegate. "Second, we protest violations of Article 5 of the Azores Convention, under which vessels of each party are not to enter into the territory of the other party and are not to fire upon vessels of the other party. Instead, at the aforementioned hyperspace node which because it is a hyperspace node is within the territory of the European Union, an American warship was present. The American warship opened fire upon starships of the European Union and of its allies. This occurred 98 hours and some minutes ago." The EU Delegate held up a pocket-comp displaying an exact time. "Entering our territory and firing upon us is a clear violation of Article 5 of the Azores Convention."

The American delegates looked meaningfully at each other. Why hadn't they heard of this, assuming it had occurred? The senior American delegate answered. "First, I have not conceded your claim that the alleged location is in fact in the territory of the

European Union. Second, I have not conceded your claim that an American warship fired at anyone, except of course in self-defense against an undoubtedly provoked attack of the European Union, an event which I have also neither conceded nor claimed occurred. I allow that your supporting evidence for this claim will also be forthcoming. The United States has no interest in breaking the Azores Convention, in particular Article 5, and I do not concede that such an event has occurred. Finally, I take note of your claim that an unspecified foreign power having starships has had the misfortune to ally itself with the European Union. This misfortune is a regrettable but fortunately entirely correctable error." Keithley peered

meaningfully at the furry European. Which obscure foreign country had gotten into extreme bodysculpting as an art form, and also had started deploying starships? They might be worth talking to separately, allowing that they could be identified. "I am grateful to the European delegation for raising with the American delegation additional interesting issues, which I shall refer to New Washington for a suitable and timely response."

"Finally," announced the EU delegate, "I come to the primary topic of this discussion. Article 599 allows joint consultation on mutual security interests. It is the belief of the European Union that an external threat has arisen requiring unified action of all of the earth's nations, together with concerted application of all of mankind's resources in a coherent logical manner. We observe, however, that much of the resources of the Solar System are under the mismanagement of the social reactionaries of the American Regime." The room's figurative temperature plummeted.

"We therefore call upon the United States to put these resources to efficient use, namely by withdrawing its Armed Forces from Mercury, Venus, the Copier Belt, and the four outer planets, and allowing the peaceful occupation of these places by the European Union and its allies. Naturally, residents of these places will be allowed to continue their life without interruption, so long as they comply with the laws of the European Union, and abandon American social-re-actionary practices, especially those comprising the social compact and private ownership of weapons. However, we entirely respect the terms of the Azores Accord, and will not employ force to pursue this objective. We urge that the United States finally recognize the failure of its absurd laissez-faire economic policies and work to a date when the rational socially responsible policies of all civilized nations are also applied to America. I have a proposed detailed timetable for the transfer of territories, which as our final negotiating point I request that you transmit to New Washington."

The American Delegate glared across the armorglass wall. "I thank the European delegate for raising this proposal, which I will bring to the attention of New Washington for its undoubtedly swift and pointed rejection. As you have presented your issues, and the neutral delegates are transferring your supporting materials, this session is now at a close." The American delegates stalked from the room.

....Nothing like a friendly bit of Diplomacy to make everyone happy

Beth McCoy: CONGRATULATIONS!

Arisia: The hotel was interesting. They had very minimal restaurants — excellent food, but minimal seating.

Your immortals seem to be very busy killing each other. It's a bit surprising that any of them are left. The various factions pursuing each other were very amusing.

Swashbuckling Mage: "The gun is your skill list", or perhaps "what do you mean, I can't have a ring of gamesmaster control?"

Collie Collier: "The gun study effect works on creationists." Once upon a time a group of creationists had the bright idea that in order to reinforce the scientific basis of creation science, they should find a bunch really bright young people of their theological bent, and get them to gain research degrees in biology. They did. They were surprised to discover that all these people were no longer creationists, because they now believed in evolution.

Kiralee: I am extremely grateful for your comments on This Shining Sea. I have been posting sections of it and of Minutegrrrls on the Baen web site www.baen.com/~bar, in the slush pile section. The Baen site has a multi-threaded posting board, which gives counts. The first chapter of Minutegrrrls got three times the readers of the first chapter of This Shining Sea. You are exactly right that the story is "How Greater Medford got lost". The Baen Bar has a chat room. No one else uses it. Perhaps we could have an IR event at some point.

Cloud has the difficulty that he has been the Greater Medford League Leader, and he has picked up Eclipse as a hanger-on. Eclipse views hanger-on as 'we momentarily have a common interest' and not 'we will trade favors', though she will trade favors with Comet. Her attitude to Comet is complex.

I indeed wrote Pickering as a very intelligent person. I am afraid that some readers may find this disconcerting, in particular that he has no problem keeping several contradictory hypotheses in mid-air at the same time. The answer to the reader's question "Does Pickering believe or disbelieve the children?" is "No." He neither believes nor disbelieves them and is happy to allow several contradictory plans to roll ahead until matters make clear. He spends a significant part of his total time making sure that his tracks are covered, so that no matter which issue turns out to be true he will be seen to have correctly figured it out.

It would not have occurred to me that he was that much of a Victorian Gentleman, rather than simply being mannerly. I'll take your word for it.

I'm glad I managed to surprise you with the shuttle rescue. The five are going to get very involved in local politics. You will get to see Eclipse doing things by herself — pursuing clues, arresting criminals, shooting up robots with a Ruggels 0.62 deluxe pistol, getting hit with a 100 kiloton nuclear device....

Best, George

The Sign Of The Dancing Priestess #9

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Personal Notes

Life continues. I'm desperately trying to ignore the coming of spring, as I am far too busy to participate. As if that isn't enough, we are trying to expand our gaming, starting a new game in May on Wednesday nights. I will probably only get to participate sporadically.

Taxes have come, and I really got walloped. This means no extraordinary expenses for 3 to 6 months. No books, no roleplaying aids, no garden, no music, no dancing, no new craft projects, no esoteric (religious) expenses, no costumes, no cloths, no color covers for IR, etc. In addition to the actual bill, I probably need to increase my withholding, so there will be less money to pay for the mistake... Sigh.

A Few Of My Favorite Things

It doesn't take a lot to role-play. Some friends, some dice, a sheet of paper or two, and at least one person with a good grasp of the mechanics being used (if you're willing to do without the mechanics, all you need are some friends and a lot of trust). But sometimes you want more than just the basics. Games can be enhanced with various objects and techniques, props and paraphernalia. These can make the experience more intense, or add organization and clarity, or make the proceedings more amusing. Most people who talk about props act as if they are a new idea for GMs. As I define 'props' - objects and techniques used to enhance roleplaying games - they've been around quite a while. And they can be introduced by players as well as the GM. By and large they fall into three categories: Simulations, Visual Aids, and Theatrical Effects.

Most of the props we think of are meant to emulate real objects. A toy gun may not shoot, but it looks kind of like the real thing. Simulations, on the other hand, merely represent, or simulate, an object within the game. Common examples are maps and miniatures. Most frequently, they are on a smaller scale than the objects they stand in place of. They can take a dramatically different form as well, as, for example, the difference between maps and the buildings they represent. While some examples of this kind of prop are quite elaborate - like painted miniatures that reproduce sex, race, class, and equipment accurately - others are simple and can be created on the fly. We use a large white board, set up on an easel by the GM's station. When necessary, it can be used to sketch out tactical positions, and place the characters at the scene. The same thing can be done with a simple piece of paper.

Simulations are the oldest form of props, and their purpose is largely one of organization and clarity. For example, to avoid arguments about where everyone is during a large, and noisy combat. However, they take some skill to use. In one game I was in the GM was pressured to plot out a combat on a map. The GM was uncomfortable with the procedure, and handled it badly. The result was an argument that destroyed the game, and nearly ended the GMs friendship with one of the players.

So, when using props for simulation, its important to make sure they are really enhancing the game. Only provide a level of precision that the players are comfortable with. If you are too demanding, the game will become bogged down in mechanics, and (especially in mechanics lite systems) arguments about where people are and what they can do. On the other hand, if you're not precise enough, it can lead to anarchy and very much the same sort of result. Generally, the point of happy medium depends on the GM and player's tastes.

The second category of props are Visual Aids. Like Simulations, these represent objects and people in the game rather than emulating them. The difference is that they are almost always pictures, used to enhance the 'look and feel' of a game. The most common examples are created by players, drawing pictures of their PCs. There are two uses for Visual Aids: to give an accurate representation of what characters in the game see; and to add to the atmosphere of the game. It would seem that using visual aids extensively would require some talent with drawing. In fact, a large art collection, augmented by catalogue pictures and a good eye for opportunities, can work just as well. (One time in Joe's game a PC unexpectedly picked up an ancient, magical, sword. Various aspects hinted, but did not confirm a particular origin. When the sword induced a vision, Joe took the player to another room for privacy - where a calendar picturing characters from the vision just happened to be hanging. And yes, they were the right style to confirm aspects of the swords origins. Thus, an eye for opportunity).

The final category of props are Theatrical Effects. I define these as effects borrowed from the theater - stage, movies, TV - to enhance roleplaying games. Examples include: props, costumes, funny accents, soundtracks (or at least music), lighting, mannerisms (body language), and, in extreme examples and/or LARPs, sets/setting. This is the sort of thing that most people mean when they talk about props in roleplaying, though they often restrict it to physical, or quasi physical, objects controlled by the GM (Music is considered a prop. Funny, or appropriate, accents aren't.) Personally, I'm not sure where the distinction lies, or why players can't get in on the fun.

Unlike the other two categories, these 'props' are meant to emulate the objects they replace, or at least the effects we know from movies and TV. In almost all cases the object is to create a kind of full body immersion in the game world in order to produce a more intense experience. The good news is that it works. Even having one player with some skill in acting applying his (or her) knowledge can enhance the game for everyone. Likewise, accents are a great way to make characters distinct and recognizable, and also to 'bring them to life.' The bad news is that it is a lot of work, and can create games that are 'too intense' or 'draining,' especially for the GM. Sewing a costume for every character would be worse than getting a miniature painted - only to have the character die in the next session.

Personally, I enjoy creating costumes for my characters out of my own wardrobe, but even when I have a costume I don't necessarily wear it to every session. I will usually go all out for one-shot scenarios, where the intensity is contained in a specific time period. However its not enjoyable on a continuing basis, where it can become one more duty to finish before the group's arrival, like sweeping the floor. To me, theatrical effect props are useful for special occasions, or when something just happens to work, but not on a continuing basis.

Naturally, different kinds of props are more common in different kinds of gaming. Not surprisingly, LARPs use a lot of theatrical effect props, since that form of roleplaying is very close to theater. Indeed, the idea of using such props seems to have been introduced to the tabletop community by LARPs, one reason props are seen as a recent innovation. Likewise computer based gaming relies heavily on visual effects. (Given the nature of the beast, I'm not sure you can exactly call them visual aids, since almost everything is presented visually.) To some extent CCGs fall into this category as well. Text oriented games - like PBEM - don't use physical props because all the players ever exchange, for the most part, is words. However, you can use accents, or indicate lighting, mood music, or body language. Some text games may also use simulations, like maps. But for the most part simulations are a part of tabletop gaming and war gaming.

All in all, props are a useful thing to add to the roleplaying stable. Many people assume that, since props are good, more props are better. In fact there is, a point where props become impractical, too expensive, or too much work. Exactly where this point lies depends on the GM and players. Even more important are the kind of props used, and the purposes they are used for. What is important for one group (tactical clarity), may mean nothing to the next. Thus the kind of props that are appropriate, and the extent to which any one kind are used, varies from game to game. Hopefully I have given you an idea of what props are available, and how they can be used.

Comments *Interregnum* #37

George Phillis (Refugee): A question (or three). Star and Aurora are twins? Comet is their elder sister? Both Cloud and Eclipse are unrelated, both to Star, Aurora, & Comet, and to each other?

I guess I should explain my comment about the shuttle rescue. When I read a story, particularly when I read a story for comment, I try and predict where the story is going, at least in terms of scope. That's because stories are built on details - since the author can't include everything, which details are included and which are discarded is important. A good example might be Pickering's garden - it's important because it tells us something about how Pickering thinks. When I comment, I like to say (maybe) xyz has no place here, or xyz is missing. And this depends on the story, not just the actual events, or the setting, but also the story's intent. So I try to guess the story's intent, which also means trying to guess the broad outlines of the plot.

Anyway, I made a guess about where the plot of The Shining Sea was going. This wasn't a roleplaying kind of guess, based on taking the 'role' of one of the characters and trying to imagine what I / they might do. Rather it was an author type guess, based on taking the role of the author and trying to imagine what details fit into the story, and what was extraneous. In this case I was assuming that the doings in the outside world were largely extraneous, and I really didn't expect the League to be discovered (or show themselves).

You surprised me, which means, at least from one reader's viewpoint, your work is unpredictable, therefore not formulaic, therefore not the work of a hack. I should point out that it was completely internally consistent, and nicely foreshadowed too, or it wouldn't have worked. So my reaction is something like, "Of course, why didn't I think of that." But now that I no longer know where the story is going, I'm less sanguine about commenting on it, until I've read the whole thing. More, please.

Re: Submitting the story again. If there is one change I'd make to the story for publication (ie to attract editors, as opposed to simply making the story stronger) it would be a stronger opening, especially the first few paragraphs. Not that it has to be faster, per say, but all the details have to count. A lot.

Things I liked about this installment of The Shining Sea: Star's explanation to the League; Eclipse being 'wrong', not 'giftfalse' about the Namestone; the magazine's response to Comet's call, and her naivety regarding same; Cloud's disappointment about the Gowists; Star and Eclipse playing chess; Aurora's comments on same.

Things I didn't like: The first paragraph of this installment. There is an aphorism that authors should show and not tell. You tend to do both, showing what you want in a scene, but also encapsulating what you want the readers to learn in a paragraph before or after the scene. The first paragraph, and the scene that follows, are a good example. Both say essentially the same thing. I think the scene would be more effective without the explanation.

Another example is the paragraph after the first scene, where Aurora wakes up. This reiterates what we learned in the first 'Eclipse having nightmares' sequence, without significantly adding anything. However, in this case I found the original scenes rather slow. So, contrary to popular opinion, I liked the paragraph which 'tells' the story better than the scenes which 'show' it. If I were to rewrite it, I would edit the first sequence so that Aurora does not speak to Eclipse, and insert this paragraph instead. (Several reasons. It would give the team a sense of continuity, a feeling that they've worked together before. The fact that it is from Aurora's point of view mitigates the sense that you are 'telling' the reader what is going on. The explanation makes more sense, and raises questions about Eclipse - why doesn't she like people expressing concern? - that draw the reader into the story. It increases the sense of Eclipse's isolation. It gives the author flexibility, in that Eclipse does not have to be aware of her reaction, and can discover this as the story progresses.) Of course doing this would also cause other changes. For example, you would lose the technical discussion of telepathy, and the agreements between Eclipse and Aurora.

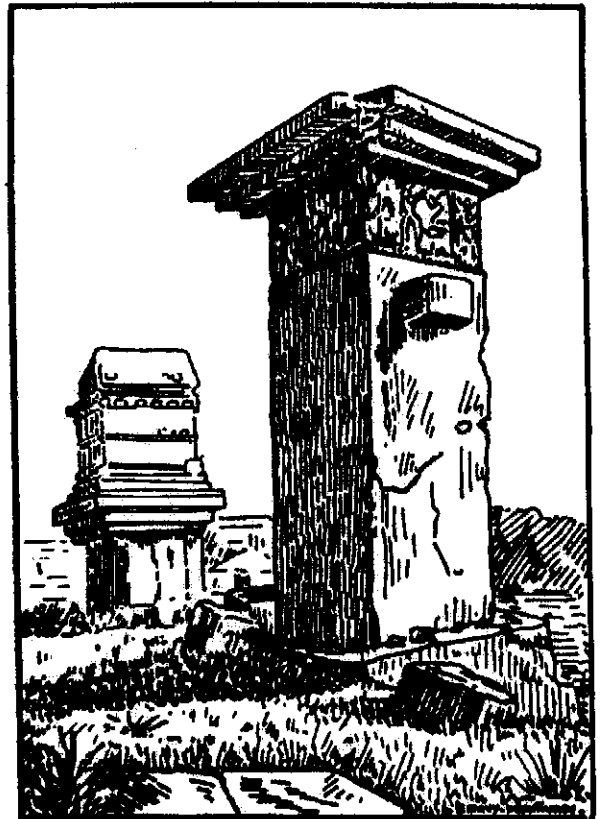
Things I liked about Minutegrrrrls: Appropriate use of colorful military jargon, especially "Beat to Quarters" and "Captain on the Bridge"; The explanation of why Ter-Minassian is here, and not leading the American Solar Navy; The interchange between Mjojo, Wolf, and Ter-Minassian regarding the use of the Anaximander; The European's retreat, and comments about diplomacy; The naming conventions.

Things I didn't like: The attack is obvious from the second sentence of the second paragraph, but it doesn't happen until nearly two paragraphs later. Of the details in between, the most interesting is the information about Ter-Minassian's activities. The least interesting details are the robot probes, budget problems, and physical description of Ileana Swenson. You also jump rapidly between viewpoints - not to the extent that I'm confused about whose viewpoint you're using at any one moment (though most editors will claim you are confusing your readers this way), but enough that I feel 'dizzy' or disoriented.

Things you could add: Reactions during the attack are appropriately professional. Once the attack is over, you might want to show some emotional reaction (after all, they just won an engagement they never expected to face).

Cindy Shettle (Words on the Wing #8): I'm not sure I agree that fanfic is based on someone else's vision. It's based on someone else's setting, and usually has to abide by the 'rules' of that setting - how things work, how particular characters are expected to act, etc. - but what the author does with that setting is up to them. In particular, they can create a different theme, atmosphere, or tone, as long as the facts remain consistent (or at least as consistent as the audience desires. There is a form of Star Trek fanfic which focuses on improbable sexual liaisons between various crew members, which hardly seems consistent with 'known facts' for the series. And of course there are always unanswered questions, which are open to interpretation.) On the other hand 'legitimate' authors have to deal with the creator's opinion, or at least what the copyright holder thinks is reasonable. For their part, these people want to create a coherent product for licensing, which requires maintaining a coherent vision, theme, atmosphere, genre, and all. So, there are people who write fiction to someone else's vision. But people writing fanfic aren't, necessarily.

As an example, when you reply to Joe's suggestions about Methos, you say that "it's hard to present a mundane villain as a serious threat to an immortal." Yet this is based on the assumption that the threat must be physical. It's a reasonable assumption, because the show's producers see it as an 'action' series, in which, ultimately, most threats are physical - one reason they fall into the decapitation of the week syndrome. Those with wider vision might realize that a conflict doesn't have to be life or death to drive a story. For example, Methos would have the same problems raising an (adopted) child as any other parent - essentially the 'problem' that drives most of Sixth Sense. Indeed, given five thousand years I'd find it hard to believe he hasn't raised a child at some point. Or what about the problem of keeping a job, or being accepted by the people around you. Sure, Methos can survive without food and shelter, but he wouldn't like it, enough so that he would worry, and (I imagine) fight to keep his job, or find a new one. That difficulty can create conflict, which, in turn, will drive the story. Suppose he was framed for murder. He could, of course, abandon his identity and create a new one, but then he would have the problem of reestablishing himself, convincing strangers to trust him, to respect him and his abilities. If he stayed he would have to find out what was going on and clear his name. Does he have investigative abilities that would make this easy, like a Holmes or Perot? Then again, not having a



heart of stone, Methos has made friends with various people over the years. If those he cares about are threatened, he will want to protect or help them. Those threats can be economic, social, or political (intrigue anyone), as well as physical, and the skills and abilities needed to deal with them may have nothing to do with *fighting, immortality, or history*. Here's another problem, one that I think applies very well to Methos, though it's hard to dramatize. He's reluctant to get involved with any thing, because it might put him in danger. But if he refuses to be tied to anything, to care about anything, how does he maintain an interest in the world? How does he keep apathy from eating his soul? (And, if he does care about something, then that something can be taken away from him, making him vulnerable to the writers art.) Most of these are things which the show glosses over, choosing not to exploit them. But just because they aren't part of the producers vision doesn't mean they can't be used by someone else.

BTW, I'm enjoying Tangled Webs a great deal. I just don't have many comments about it. Partly that's because I haven't seen it all, partly because I don't have anything bad to say.

Michael Lavoie (Real Magick #18): I didn't realize how closely related my two topics were. When I mentioned describing a game, I was thinking more along the lines of advertisements for new players, or discussions with same. Not how you defined a game's genre or style. In retrospect, I think you're right, that it comes down to very much the same thing. Your description of your own game bears this out. For example, if I hear 'Sword & Sorcery' I think Swords (PCs) against Sorcery (NPCs), but this is obviously not what you mean. So, the term needs to be defined. On the other hand, I'd be interested to hear how a combat oriented game became more focused on interacting with the world and the characters in it. I also liked your definition of Science Fiction. I might use it, whatever the high mucky-mucks think.

Joseph Teller (The Swashbuckling Mage Rides Again #8): I was at a panel at Arisia that discussed writing and roleplaying. About the only conclusion it seemed to reach was that roleplayers became writers when they got frustrated with the other players lack of insight or appreciation for what they set up. I think roleplaying teaches a lot of the basics of fiction - what's dramatically interesting in a plot, how to keep a setting internally consistent, how characters interact realistically, what dialog sounds like, etc. Eventually players start imagining really cool possibilities, which the other players don't pick up on (fail to appreciate). Then they go off and write.

Yes, I know you keep designing new settings and play-testing them. I find it very frustrating. Many roleplayers have been in at least one long term campaign, and have cool, well developed, characters from these campaigns. I'd like such a character - like Jack, or Max, or Sindar . It's not the power level I'm talking about, but the sense of depth, of really knowing the character, of having stories to tell about them. It's draining to keep having to come up with new characters, each one unique, different, and with a detailed history, habits, style, personality, goals, etc. I think I may be beginning to burn out. (Or maybe I'm suffering from a lack of appreciation, and should start writing.)

Everyone has different tastes. You describe the pace of Guilty Pleasures as "fast enough to satisfy me." I find it unrelenting., brutal, and sometimes unrealistic (as, for example, the speed with which Phillip - an act at Guilty Pleasures, the nightclub that gives the book its title - goes from unavoidable bother to cherished friend, nearly passing through romantic entanglement along the way.) I admit the protagonist's no nonsense attitude is refreshing, but I have seen other, and better, versions of it, most notably a space-vampire tale called Hunting the Corrigan's Blood.

Collie Collier (FireStarter Dix-Huit): Oh Boy, where to start. Let me try the most complex and contentious subject first, the application of Simpson's Theory to religion in gaming. You're right, of course, that Simpson's Theory (the principal that what the GM believes becomes fact in their games) doesn't just apply to military tactics and socio-political movements, but to ethical and religious values. However, this can be good, as well as bad.

There is a book called Women's Ways of Knowing which talks about some of the various ways people learn. The authors were largely interested in how women learn, but in the process they uncovered several modes of learning that are universal, and which they contrast to the traditional mode of 'logical debate', in which presented ideas are attacked and defended before being adopted / learned (this, of course, is college level learning, where the students are on , or nearly on, a par with the teachers). One of the modes they contrast most sharply with this is 'connected learning'. Instead of testing / attacking an informants assumptions, the student adopts them and explores their

ramifications from 'the inside.' This has nothing to do with the student's own beliefs. Rather it's a kind of 'thought experiment.' The student sets aside her beliefs for the duration, and picks them up again when the lesson is over.

An example is given of two students talking in the dorm. One is from India, and the other wishes to learn what it is like to live there. In essence she wants to know what assumptions the girl from India makes in her daily life, and how these assumptions affect the way she lives. To do this she puts aside her own preconceived notions of the value of the Indian caste system, and her feelings about the way Indian women are treated. She puts aside the opinion that the heavy reliance placed on astrology in India is silly and superstitious, or that Yoga is the best thing since sliced bread. Indeed, she may put aside all opinions, positive or negative, in order to listen to what her informant has to say. As she gains understanding of the topic, she will test her knowledge of it by imagining possible situations ("You mean if I went into a restaurant dressed like such-and-such everyone would laugh at me?" "Yes. It would be pretentious." "But not if I..." Which, by the way, is not about fashion, but what people think is pretentious in India. Fashion is merely a convenient symbology.)

In some ways the above paragraph is another example. It's been a long time since I read the book in question, and while I remember the example of learning about India from a dormmate, I've forgotten the details. So, I start by accepting the assumptions put forth in the book, and imagine how they would affect the situation presented. In order to do this I find that I need to make up preconceptions that one might have about India. They aren't my opinions, merely ideas adopted to better explore the central concept. For example, American society tends to disagree with the Indian caste system. But opening up a debate, while enjoyable, and perhaps giving some insight on whether and how life should be predictability, will give you no information on how the caste system affects the life of this woman, and, by extension, the lives of all women in India. On the other hand, not debating the caste system doesn't mean the questioner agrees with it. The question of its value has been set aside for the duration. In the same way I set aside my own opinions to imagine what could interfere with this mode of learning - a debate about the caste system - and explained how it is dealt with. I give other examples of judgements and opinions to further explain how connected learning treats them. My aim is not to defend this method as the best way to learn, or even to defend its existence, but to explore what it is like so my readers will have a better understanding of it. Which is, in and of itself, an example of the method in question.

There are a couple of things you might note. One is that this method is particularly good for learning about other people and other cultures, but not so good for disciplines like science that depend on rigorous peer review. The other is that this method is often used 'as recreation' rather than in the classroom. For example, it is a lot like roleplaying. I put myself in the role of a student in the dorms, trying to learn about another country from a fellow student and native. I imagine the kinds of difficulties I would face (judgements leading to arguments) and the way they are dealt with (disguising my opinion to explore another point of view). Once I have the information I imagine what I will do with it, testing it out with my new friend, and gaining new knowledge, not just about clothing styles, but about how people in India view them. In fact roleplaying games are an excellent way to use this method.

Well, almost. The principle of Simpson's Theory means a game's 'learning potential' is only as good as the GMs knowledge and honesty. But, if you're trying to learn about how the Christian faith affects peoples lives in the modern world, something I happen to be interested in, it works pretty well. Find a Christian GM you trust, accept the assumptions he, or she, is running under, and see where it leads. Yes, your character probably won't be as successful as those which 'know the system' (i.e. how Christianity works). But that isn't the point. The point is to have some space to make mistakes, to watch and learn, and have a little fun in the process. And, it doesn't have to be Christianity. It also works for other cultures and religions - indeed, one of the draws for both Tekumel and Runequest is that they did a good job of this, presenting cultures that are truly alien.

Of course, you have to be careful. Games have to be clearly labeled. This is always a good idea, but particularly important with an issue like religion. Partly this is because it causes so much discord in general. However, religion can cause problems in another way because it can so fundamentally alter 'how the world works.' And 'how the world works' is often the source of arguments in roleplaying.

So, it's important that people understand, for example, that crosses hold off vampires because of the power of Ghad, (and therefore the eye of Horus just won't work), or at least that reality may be working by different rules than they

are used to (even if they don't know what those rules are.) Given Simpson's Theory, and the fact that GMs will act on their own beliefs subconsciously even if they don't do so explicitly, it might be a good idea for GMs to be tell (or is that warn) players about their beliefs even if they don't intended to make them part of the game. I suppose a sufficiently minority belief would risk turning off players... On the other hand, we usually include some such warning on our advertisements, and we haven't had too many problems. If it works for *Pagans and Heretics*, it ought to work for Christians as well. And it allows people like yourself, who aren't interested in such things, to avoid them.

On a different but related note, I'd like to point out that, while redemption and the consequences of ones actions are Christian themes, they aren't exclusively Christian themes. Indeed, they're common themes in our games - magic (for that matter anything) always has a price. The mechanics of Karma and Cosmic Synchronicity assure that what goes around comes around, and give characters reason to try and amend their mistakes. I, and several other players, have deliberately taken characters trying to make up their pasts. For example, the current party includes a rabbi who, in his young and impressionable days, was brainwashed by a cult that practiced ritual murder. Yet these are obviously not Christian games. I wish I knew what the difference was. What makes a game Christian? Or Non-Christian.

It seems to me this is more subtle than just the symbology or themes being used. For example, The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe is considered a Christian allegory, because there are strong parallels between its characters / plot and the Christian myth cycle (the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ). But, as far as I can remember, the symbology is not overtly Christian. Oh, forgive me, there is one blatant Christian reference, when the humans are called the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. And later in the series it does become quite explicit. But for the most part it doesn't 'look' Christian. No crosses, no cathedrals, no priests or reverends or preachers, etc So instead we say it has a Christian theme.

That would tend to indicate that something with the same theme, but using a different words and symbols, would still be Christian. But then look at the games I mentioned above. Christian themes (redemption, consequences), but with mechanics don't 'sound' Christian - for example, calling the mechanism that enforces consequences "Karma" instead of "Judgement." I seriously doubt that anyone would call our games Christian, even when they use figures from Christian myth, like demons and angels. And this would tend to indicate the opposite, that it is the words and symbols used, and not the underlining themes, which defines whether or not something is Christian. And the contradiction between these two examples indicates that it is something else entirely.

It isn't the Christian myth cycle either. The major element of the cycle, a figure that is both divine and mortal, who dies as sacrifice and is resurrected to repeat the cycle, is not unique to Christianity. Wicca, at least as presented by Starhawk in The Spiral Dance, has a similar figure (though He is hardly as central as Christ). Joseph Campbell identified it as a motif, found in several mythologies, and named it 'The Year King' or 'Corn King', since usually this was tied to agricultural cycles and repeated yearly (as, in fact, happens in Christianity.)

Nor do I think it is scripture. I admit I haven't read the Bible exhaustively. But what I have read, and what I've seen of Bible studies (yes, I've been at a few) indicates that the scripture as put down, and the scripture as interpreted and taught in modern America, are two very different things. I'm far more interested in the latter, since what I am trying to understand is Christian culture, and how it affects peoples lives today, not 2000 years ago. If I could understand why some things are perceived as Christian while others aren't, I be a lot closer to understanding that. But all I've come up with so far are contradictions.

The other comment I have to append to all this concerns Simpson's Theory. Perhaps you will allow me to embarrass your sweetie once more? I've long known the principal behind this theory, but never been able to put it into words. I could never come up with a good example (for certainly it should be stated by example) which would illustrate the principal without dividing people according to their opinions of the example. One couldn't say, for example, "If the GM believes in communism than all capitalists are pigs." because then people would argue about communism rather than getting the point. So, I'm quite grateful to Simpson's eloquence for coming up with an example I can use - which is why I've insisted on attaching his name to it.



Whew.... Now I'll see if I can address some of your other remarks and questions.

Re: gaming group size. My personal preference would be to run two games of 5-6 players at the same time. I don't really like large games either, but it is the only time I have to socialize (I'm far too busy to do something for only one reason). There are already three of us, which means in a 5-6 player game there would only be 2-3 other people to socialize with. If there were two games, not only would that mean more people, but I could do something with people besides Joe and Cindy all the time (not that I don't like Joe and Cindy, but in some ways spending so much of my time with them is limiting.) Our living room is set up so that 8-9 people can game there comfortably. For some reason we never get more than that in the group (I think that when people are uncomfortable gaming they tend to prioritize other activities, and then they don't have time to game). Joe insists we need at least ten regular players before we can think of setting up two different games, so of course we never do. I think it would work better to plan to run two games and recruit accordingly. Of course then we would also need to find two GMs.

Re: The comments in 7th Sea about making sure you are all playing in the same game, and not poisoning the PC pool. I also agree they are excellent advice. Such a pity the source is under copyright. It makes it difficult to pull out that piece and expand on it.

Re: Leadership. Thank you for your comments on the two different styles of leadership. Leadership by assertion can work in a roleplaying game, but it requires a lot of work on the part of the GM and whoever is playing party leader. The GM has to set up the leader's position - for example, giving them access to information about the group's mission and objective, if they are working for / with someone - and has to make it clear to the other players that this is an aspect of the game being set up. And, whoever plays the leader has to genuinely do a good job, which often requires real leadership skill on the part of the player. I've been in this position on a couple of occasions - usually when I want to learn 'leadership' as a skill, and want someplace to practice less risky than my job.

Leading by example works better in roleplaying games, but also requires someone who is good at it, and who is playing a character for whom it is appropriate. Not every character jumps up and down, screeching with enthusiasm, or the equivalent. And the people with the charisma don't always have the best plans. Of course, you can switch leaders, according to the needs of the moment, and who is most persuasive.

But this doesn't really address the central issue I was concerned with. Which is how to define the MO and goals of a group (for example, when to use force, how much and what sort). Usually the leader sets the standards, largely by example. This can be difficult if the group doesn't have a leader. For example, our current group has an extremely pacifist rabbi, and a very bloodthirsty samurai. The closest thing we have to a leader is Tycho, who makes good suggestions when it comes to tactics, but doesn't say much about who should live or die. So the results are a bit, ah, schizophrenic. I suspect we would do better with a moderate who could gain some respect from both sides. But I'm not sure how to achieve that.

Re: Deadline reminders. Joe usually sends those out from my account. I will ask him to include dates. What you want is something that says 'the deadline is April 7th' rather than 'the deadline is coming soon' or 'the deadline has been extended a week,' right? When does it help to hear this? A month before the deadline? Two weeks? A week?

Re: I enjoyed the class paper you included in your response to Joe's article on crime in the future. I especially liked the fact that you included the questions along with your response, as it helped define the terms and how they were being used in the paper. I get irritated with academic jargon (like 'class') which has a real but different meaning outside of academia. I suppose the actual definition is the same, but the connotations are markedly different, and in this case it causes quite a bit of unfortunate confusion.

Re: Socialization of Children. Of course there are other activities that teach socialization. However, most of them aren't accessible to the 'type' I'm talking about. Off the top of my head, I can't think of any other activities, except perhaps the SCA, which fills the same niche. Which is a pity.

Also, I didn't mean to imply that all gamers were 'geeks.' To begin with, the definition I was using - high intelligence and creativity, low socialization skills - doesn't rule out physical activity, although it isn't generally considered part of the stereotype. But the main reason this doesn't hold true is that once 'geeks' learn socialization skills through gaming, they're no longer 'geeks.' Usually they still like to game, and continue doing so. This might explain why gaming is so stratified by age - old gamers tend not to game with young gamers.

Re: The Road Not Taken, and modern games without guns. Actually, there is a period that - almost - works well for me. Guns didn't really become effective until the invention of bullets, or at least the cap and ball method of shooting that came into use about the time of the civil war. Or rather, they were effective militarily, but not so effective for one on one fights, because they took a long time to load. You could get off one shot, but then you had to use other means to defend yourself. However, the time period is not usually run the way I prefer. Mostly it is swashbuckling, or political intrigue, and doesn't touch on cultural concerns. When it does, it is too often portrayed as the scientific good guy versus the superstitious church, science and technology being so new they had not yet had time to establish their own traditions to rebel against.

What you're talking about, in terms of the medieval world's relationship to magic and religion, is probably true. This is why I can't just play in the traditional fantasy setting, with science added. It wouldn't feel right. I have seen something like it, with magical scholarship in place of scientific research. But in this case the characters were powerful aristocrats and not downtrodden peasants. Said peasants were never brought into the picture, a fact that stressed my suspension of disbelief and eventually lead me to stop reading the author.

Re: magic vs. science. Well, I admit I have a bit of a problem here. My current working definition of magic, gleaned from reading various occult sources, is also a pretty darn good description of technology. And I'm convinced that at least one commonly used technology really is a form of magic. Then there is the fact that magic bears the same relationship to religion that technology bears to science, and science has taken over at least one of religion's functions - telling us the true nature of our world - and may not be distinguishable from religion after all. Indeed, I believe that Clarke's famous statement about sufficiently advanced technology is only half-right. They aren't indistinguishable; they are, in fact, the same thing. The only difference is that science, which tells us the true nature of our world, says that 'magic' doesn't exist. Maybe I'll do an IR topic on it sometime, if I can stomach the thought of writing a twenty page article on the subject.

Re: your sociology paper. When I said it was interesting to see what a sociology paper looked like I was referring to form and style, not to the actual content. Personally, I really wish more studies like this would be done on gaming, as it is one way to defuse the bad press. Also, I think you really did discover something - it just didn't match very well to what you started out with.

As far as reading your other papers, I would love to but doubt that I will have the time for at least a year. Maybe someday, in the far distant future, I will only have to work part time, and then I can focus on such things as writing and editing (which I am told I'm good at).

Re: Mike Yoder. He comes from New Mexico by way of tech school in California. I don't believe he ever spent time in Florida. He may, however, be familiar to some IR readers, as he used to write for The Wild Hunt. I believe the zine name was Delta Flame.

Re: Organized religion vs. immoral laws. Well, since I believe Dr. King was a reverend, it's not surprising that his starting point was a christian church. As for the quote - well I'd expect it given how important it was to his philosophy.

Re: having players control the contacts of other PCs. It sounds like an interesting idea. Perhaps I'll get a chance to put it into practice sometime.

Re: methods used to get people to post more regularly in email games. The method you describe is similar to what I'm trying to do with IR. Admittedly, I used the 'extra time' option (one reason it takes two weeks to get out an issue.) But it's my opinion that I won't convince people to write for IR by begging and wheedling and extending deadlines.

Re: the U.S. compared to the rest of the world. I think misunderstood me. While I think the U.S. isn't 'good enough,' and may not actually be 'the best,' I do happen to believe that it's one of the 'better' places in the world, at least for me personally. Given the sex and class of my birth, I would be dead if I had been born in most countries, and there are some I'm fairly certain wouldn't have been worth surviving in. Not that the U.S. was exactly a cake walk.

Kiralee McCauley (The Sign of the Dancing Priestess #8): Actually this is a reply to **Dale Meier** of the **Chrome Libram**. In my comments I forgot to answer his questions about the game I ran. The game was a modern conspiracy, quasi cyberpunk game, with an element of magic. We had five regular players, and three others who dropped out during the game (one who only showed up for character creation). Both Ben and I played NPCs as part of the PC party, so it was a pretty large group. The game is intended to be pretty high powered - one of the PCs is a phoenix. Currently we are on hiatus, but should pick up again in a couple of months.

This is an article I found on the net that I thought I'd pass along. It's heavily editorialize, but not the only one on the subject (a much longer one recently appeared on Slashdot.org. On the other hand, it sounds reasonable and represents my viewpoint on a subject I care about (and which affects gaming) but it's much more elegant than I am, and it's already finished - always a big plus. The author is Johannah Lavson-Hubal (email at johannahhubal@yahoo.com) It originally appeared on the www.bostongamers.com mailing list. If anyone has any ideas about what to do, I'd love to hear them.

McCarthyism for Kids!

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W.A.V.E., a profit-making program ramping up in the southern U.S. and soon to go national, will use Web sites, toll-free numbers, T-shirts and cash to encourage students to anonymously turn in classmates they consider depressed, dangerous or potentially violent. This horrifically stupid Geek Profiling would be blatantly unconstitutional if applied to adults.

According to David Bresnahan, reporting on the WorldNet Daily site, the new "W.A.V.E" program, developed by Pinkerton Services Group, a division of the international security firm Pinkerton, Inc. is starting up in North Carolina, and is soon to go nationwide.

W.A.V.E. offers anonymous toll-free lines for students, who will be trained to watch for and report "dangerous" behavior like depression, or kids with weapons. Every North Carolina school will have free access to this

program, which will include a Web site, classes, school assemblies and special sessions for parents and teachers. W.A.V.E America was created by a North Carolina task force on school violence working together with Pinkerton. A contact list of law-enforcement agencies is also being developed for each school in the state to notify when a tip has been received by Pinkerton on its nationwide toll-free line.

W.A.V.E joins new software "security" programs like Mosaic 2000, which is being tested in public schools in America to compile and computerize information on students believed to be dangerous or potentially violent.

This new rat-on-kids industry is an offshoot of the Geek Profiling anti-Net hysteria that broke out all across the United States after the Columbine High School killings, whose first anniversary is fast approaching. Despite the

fact that horrific incidents like Columbine are extremely rare, and that the FBI and Justice Department have both reported that youth violence has dropped to its lowest levels in more than half a century, the belief persists in much of America that technologies like the Internet (and activities like computer gaming) are turning otherwise healthy school children into mass murderers.

In a newsmagazine survey taken earlier this year, 81 percent of Americans said they believed the Net was responsible for the Columbine massacre.

In the lunatic world of American education, and the surreal aftermath of Columbine, it now seems perfectly reasonable, even sensible, to suspend and force into counseling children who who are angry, depressed, who wear white, game obsessively, or who say intemperate and stupid things. The W.A.V.E program is not only institutionalizing but rewarding a culture in which kids are being taught to turn in classmates whose behavior they consider abnormal or dangerous. It also reinforces the notion that school students have no Constitutional rights of due process such as privacy, confronting accusers, behaving in non-conformist ways, or even knowing that accusations against them exist.

Although school-age children are presumed to have few rights, it's obvious that this kind of anonymous and intrusive law enforcement would blatantly unconstitutional for adults. Just yesterday, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a Florida law that permits police to search people for firearms solely on the basis of anonymous tips. Citing the Fourth Amendment, which prohibits unreasonable search and seizure, the court ruled that such a law would enable "any person to harass another to set in motion an intrusive, embarrassing police search..." Authorities, the court ruled, needed some corroborating evidence before they could invade the privacy of any citizen. It's frightening to imagine how school authorities can possibly teach citizenship when they have so wantonly violate the very idea of constitutional rights.

This Orwellian phobia (who do we turn in next?: "dangerous" parents, neighbors and sibs?) has been a staple of the most venal political systems in the 20th Century, from Nazism to fascism to Communism. It is presumptuous and arrogant on so many levels it's astonishing to see public officials like North Carolina Gov. Jim Hunt adopt the idea so unthinkingly and enthusiastically. But he's not alone -- plenty of parents and educators are along for the ride.

It isn't clear where information goes once it's collected by kid-profiling software, or toll-free hot-lines. Presumably, it remains in a computerized dangerous-kids database for life. This is just one more reason that it's insane to ask young children to evaluate their classmates for emotional disorders and other signs of potentially "dangerous" behavior. Not only are kids patently unqualified to make judgments like that, the temptation to turn in kids that are socially competitive, "geeky," different, disliked, abrasive or unhappy seems almost irresistible, especially when doing so brings tangible rewards like cash, and is cloaked under anonymity. Monitoring and evaluating behavior is a science that's supposed to be done by trained professionals -- teachers, psychologists, guidance counselors, and therapists. Even then, kids ought to have the right to be openly confronted with the accusation that they're a menace to society, and to respond, rather than wonder if some angry classmate has branded them for life on an anonymous toll free line run by a profit-making private company with a vested interest in promoting the notion that schools -- and kids -- are dangerous.

"A safe school environment is fundamental to helping North Carolina's students succeed in school," announced Governor Hunt. "Every school ought to be a safe one and W.A.V.E. American will help get every kid involved. This program is more than just a tip line, it teaches students and parents to look for the early signs of violent behavior and to resolve conflicts constructively."

This is the worst kind of political exploitation of kids. It takes schools off the hook and turns the complex process of school administration over to adolescents. Kids will ultimately have to live in fear that the deskmate they jostled with will turn them in for money, or that bragging about exploits on Doom will get them turned into W.A.V.E. as "unbalanced."

If a kid or a parent becomes aware that a classmate has a gun and plans to use it, there are plenty of cops and law enforcement officials they can call. There is no statistical evidence to support the notion that schools are so dangerous that children need to be manipulated into turning one another in. Nor is there much doubt about who will be targeted -- geeks, nerds, Goths, oddballs, along with anyone else who is discontented, alienated and individualistic.

That kids are being rewarded for doing this is revolting enough. That they are being asked to do by a profit-making private corporation for money suggests a culture a lot sicker and more dangerous than most schoolkids.

FIRESTARTER

being the mental and occasionally scholastic wanderings of Collie Collier

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Lots of folks confuse bad management with destiny.

— Frank Hubbard

DUNDRACON

Well, I'm just back from a weekend at a local gaming convention called Dundracon. It was a lovely time, I must say. I got to stay in a nice, comfy room, let others pick up after me, spend a lot of time with my sweetie *sans* computers or other similar distractions, eat wonderful food, laze about to my heart's content, chat (with no time pressures) with a number of friends I don't ordinarily get to see... it was very pleasant! Add to that the fact that I got to game in two fun games that had good GMs and interested players this weekend, and I'd have to say it was quite the success.

However, since reflection is essential to growth, in the hopes that my con speculations will either interest or help others I'll paraphrase my sweetie, and lay out our speculative (and wandering) answers to his question, "What did we learn from Dundracon?"

1) GAMING HAS AGED

Maybe it's just me, maybe it's just the Bay Area... but there were a *lot* of middle-aged and gray-haired older folks... and not many younger folks around. As my sweetie astutely noted, for all that vampire games are derided, it was *they* that brought in not only a *lot* more women, but more young folks in general -- and, he pointed out, better dressed ones too! ☺

In some ways I hope Hasbro listens carefully to Wizards of the Coast's Peter Atkinson -- and that he knows what he's doing, and will successfully bring kids into gaming, with the Pokemon CCGs and games. I'm also hoping his new licensing agreement

concerning the Harry Potter stories works out well. Think about it -- a child can read the fantasy-oriented Harry Potter stories, then play the game! That's a marvelous way, I think, to draw more kids into gaming. Now if only we can persuade ourselves to try to help the new kids... I know I'm not terribly patient myself, when it comes to my gaming entertainment.

Still, that sort of encouragement from someone who's done it for a while is, as far as I know, one of the best ways to get folks into gaming. Rich Staats, what do you and your children think? Has gaming with you made it easier for them to learn gaming? Do they game with other friends as well?

Oddly enough, shortly after writing this I received a lovely complimentary letter from someone who'd been reading my website and had some questions... and who mentioned running for his own kids. We're having an interesting conversation about bringing in the new generation, and why most gamers don't want to be bothered. I'm crossing my fingers that he'll let me weave his e-mailed comments and mine together into an interesting future zine for here! ☺

But to return to what we were talking about... there seems to be three 'life stages' where the gaming bug bites -- either they learned it as a child by playing with a friend, older sibling, or parent (a rare occurrence, in my limited experience)... or they learned it in high school with friends... or they found it in college, through the college club or mutually interested friends. It's possible to start in one stage, drop it for some reason, and pick gaming up again later, I think. I myself did that when I discovered gaming in high school but wasn't able to

persuade my parents to drive me the 20 miles to town in order to game... I was quite excited to re-discover role-playing games via my college's gaming club.

Only the first of these three life stages offers any guidance or assistance to new players from experienced older players. The other two stages are more peer-taught. Here's a short, nice article, titled "*5 Reasons Your Kids Should Play Dungeons and Dragons*" on why encouraging kids to role-play is a good thing. It specifically mentions that gaming with your kids is something you can do *together*:
<http://www.mpog.com/pvp/rants_dd.html>.

As my sweetie also pointed out, most older folks don't *want* to game with kids -- but if we don't make an effort to bring in new hobbyists, the gaming hobby will eventually die.

...which leads me to the next hypothesis:

2) WE NEED MORE GAMES!

Yeah, yeah, I know everyone says this... but I was doing some idle research at the con, and was quite surprised by the results. It's true a convention isn't the same as gaming 'out there in real life.' Still... we *really* need more games. If we've persuaded a friend to play, but we can't find a game for them to play in... our persuasions are a bit pointless, yes?

A bit of explanation regarding the con, for my assertions: I was chatting with one of the con organizers, who is a friend of mine. I mentioned that my sweetie and I had registered for games in six time slots of gaming through the day; i.e. the time slots starting at 8:00am Saturday, 4:00pm Saturday, 8:00pm Saturday, 8:00am Sunday, etc. Of those twelve applications (two people trying for six time slots) we'd managed to get scheduled into only *two* games -- one each, between the two of us. I asked my friend if there was anything wrong with the computer programs the con was using, or something else perhaps, that such a paucity of scheduled games was occurring?

I was *quite* surprised when my friend said that he was glad we'd each gotten into a game -- that, in fact,

the con was happy if it could successfully schedule ONE game for every con-goer, for the *entire* weekend! However, after listening to his explanation, I'd have to say his statement was quite reasonable.

It seems the problem is a physical/cost limitation within the hotel. There are only so many rooms the convention can afford to rent to run games and/or panels in. There are approximately 1200 folks that attend the con. About 160 folks are accepted to be con GMs, and each GM is allowed to run only one game. Those gaming rooms are kept full all weekend long! So when you do the math you see:

$$\begin{aligned} 160 \text{ games} \times 6 \text{ players per game} &= \\ 960 \text{ players in scheduled games} \end{aligned}$$

which is *almost* the same amount as the number of folks attending (about 1200, in fact)... and there were quite a few of those scheduled games that had eight or more players in them as well. So you can see why my friend was happy we'd made a scheduled game apiece.

In the case of my sweetie and myself, we got lucky -- we both went to the game that only I was scheduled for. By asking nicely and being patient we persuaded the GM to replace a no-show with my sweetie. Also, since we knew some folks in non-scheduled games we had no dearth of gaming to participate in, had we so wished. However, were I someone young and new who'd come to the con *just* to game, I can see how this would be a serious problem. Paying \$80 a night (unless they can find someone to crash with) for three nights so they can participate in only ONE game -- would be a real bite!

So how to fix this? Well, that speculative discussion (over a delicious dinner) between my sweetie, myself, and some friends, led to the following hypothesis...

3) GAMING IS 'SUBCLASSING'

The situation was as follows: no more rooms could be rented; there were plenty of GMs; the players needed more chances to be in games. Therefore we decided the best way to make sure there were more games for folks was to use some of

the already-rented rooms for more scheduled games. The immediate question came up – which room?

Reviewing the con area, we realized there were several 'categories' of folks there. There was the SCA room, the gaming rooms (which doubled occasionally as panel rooms), the open gaming rooms, the anime room, the video games room, the dealer room, the flea market room, the two or three miniatures rooms, the CCG room, and about three or four LARP rooms. Interestingly enough, we realized there wasn't much overlap in most of these... the LARPer didn't tend to play in the CCG or scheduled RPG table-top games... the miniatures gamers didn't tend to watch much anime or SCA... and so on. In fact, the greatest 'overlapping' group was the SCA, which not only had a lot of gamers in it, but also almost all of the con organizing staff as well – many of whom had been participants at that initial 'dress-up' party that gave birth to the SCA.

We're not really sure why folks seem to be picking a class or category of gaming, then sticking with it to the (mostly) exclusion of other types of gaming. It's my thought that it would be wise to encourage cross-class gaming, in fact... specialization in a niche hobby sounds rather like a good way to specialize yourself out of existence!

But to return to the immediate question -- how to get more room in which to game? The obvious answer is to empty out a room (or rooms) that's already in use... which brings up another difficult situation -- who do you throw out? Who do you decide to annoy? What segment of the gaming population do you lose?

It wasn't like the space wasn't thriftily used. *Every* room was in almost constant use. Registration, and even miniatures tables, were set up in one of the extra-wide hallways. My personal thought was to lose the SCA and/or the anime rooms. I walked into the anime room two or three times during the weekend. Every time I was in there I saw no more than a handful of folks... usually no more than between three and five. It's possible I just happened to pick bad times to walk by... but I can't imagine most folks go to a gaming con specifically to watch

anime. For that matter, I also find it hard to believe many folks come to a gaming con just to watch the SCA! However, I suspect the SCA is a bit of a nostalgia thing for many of the con staff, so I can understand their not wanting to ask the SCA members to set up their displays in someone's room, so as to free up another rented room for gaming.

My second thought would be to combine the open gaming room and the CCG room. This, I suspect, is starting to happen already. One of the open gaming rooms had round tables scattered all through the center, and had long thin rectangular tables with clean butcher paper taped on the top lining each long wall. That would free up another room. I thought about emptying the video games room for gaming also, but it seemed quite well attended every time I peeked into it. If it's bringing in steady money for the con, then I certainly shan't recommend stopping it.

My next thought was the LARPs. A LARP takes a very large room to start play in, since you need to be able to fit maybe 50 to 100 folks into it to receive their gaming directions. However, once the game's started the LARPer generally tend to scatter out into the hallways and other rooms. Still, they do need some designated room in which they can contact a GM type... which led me to the following thought – why not stagger the times the LARPs start, so you could re-use the rooms? That way you could start your first LARP in your large convention room. Instructions are given, and everyone is told that the contact room is *not* this room, but rather a named smaller one nearby. Folks scatter out to game... and the LARP game planners move to that contact room, within about an hour or so of their starting time. Then the next LARP moves into the (now empty) large convention room, and does the same – hand out instructions, name the designated smaller contact room, and the players all scatter out into the hallways... then the next LARP...

It's possible there's some extenuating factor I'm not aware of, but it would seem to me that doing this would allow a number of LARPs to be running simultaneously, without tying up a commensurate number of huge convention rooms. Once all your

LARPs are started up, the one original big room can be used for something else... some part time anime, perhaps, or maybe the flea market. Which brings me to my next pet peeve... why on earth was the flea market running simultaneously with the dealer's room?

Okay, okay, I'll admit it – I'm prejudiced, due to being an ex-retailer/con dealer. No, it's not something I was wild about... but I do know that life's hard enough on dealers at cons (at least in this area, where there's the absurd custom of insisting that each dealer carry only one or two "officially sanctioned" product lines – supposedly it's to prevent the dealers undercutting each other, but from my experience it's more so dealers with an "in" can make a killing and screw anyone else) without other amateur vendors potentially drawing away customers. Having a room for the flea market at the *same time* as the dealer's room is open just seems darned rude to me. Put the flea market outside, on the hotel patio, or if the weather is inclement put them inside – but for heaven's sake, I don't think they should be running the flea market all day, at the same time as the regular dealer's room!

So all the above suggestions would free up some other rooms as well. Why not use those newly-freed-up rooms for the panels? I noticed that one panel took up two gaming rooms... and the three panels I peeked in on were sparsely (at best) attended. Why waste good gaming space on a panel few if any are interested in? After all, the whole point to a gaming con, at least to my way of seeing it... is to *game*! Which leads me (via a *wildly* indirect route! ☺) to my last hypothesis re what we learned from the con, namely...

4) I PLAY CHRISTIANS WELL

Okay, so this one's not much of a biggie... but it was nice to be complemented on how well I played this weekend! I ended up playing handed-out characters in both games. One was, believe it or not, a *saint*! – in a very variant Call of Cthulhu-style-mechanics game set in the 1300's in a similar-but-different world than this one. Her sainthood was not noted on her stats sheet initially -- I found it out

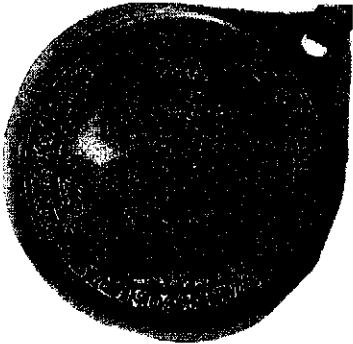
later, when the GM handed us our individual "Secrets Sheet" for the game. It was quite the surprise to me, to learn what I was *really* playing! The other was a good *medieval christian knight* in a variant Pendragon game, also set in a similar-but-different world. In both cases demonic influences had to be exorcised by the game groups, after defeating various foes and solving a few puzzles.

Amusingly enough in both games my knowledge of christianity and the bible stood me in good stead. In the case of the saint I got a few good, applicable bible verses woven into the gaming, which the others seemed to like, so I was happy about that. Also in my using the Seven Virtues in playing my saintly character I inadvertently helped other characters as well – they started trying to figure out what virtues their own characters would have. Well, all right, I could only remember four of the virtues – chastity, poverty, obedience, and humility... but at least we had fun implementing them into the characters! ☺ I was also happy that I was able to help one rather retiring player come forward and enjoy himself more in the game – it was his character who stepped in and bravely performed the complicated ritual that would save us all. It was well played by him, too, which was nice.

In the case of the knight, I apparently surprised the GM. He'd been expecting someone to play a rather 20th C style of person, I guess. Since I was trying hard to really play a good, straightforward, direct, christian knight, *a la* Malory, I accidentally led the party directly to the dénouement of the game! The GM was more startled than upset though, and after listening to my reasoning for my character's actions he agreed with how she was behaving. Also, none of his clues were missed, and it was a fun game for all of us – always a nice thing for a GM, I think. He complimented me later on my knowing the knightly virtues, and portraying so well a 'trewe and gentil knyght.' ☺

I'd also like to note that the game where I was playing the saint had a *really* nicely prepared GM. Not only did he have black and white xeroxes of appropriate pictures of things and/or places to hand out to us at different points in the game, which we

got to keep... but he also had plastic-coated, *color* photos of the two actual christian relics our characters were searching for! It was very nice, and added immeasurably to the flavor of the game. He also had a *very* attractively painted model of a lovely, ruined gothic cathedral to use on the battle map during the game, and appropriate minis for all of our characters. The crowning touch, for me, was when my character prayed to the archangel Michael to bless the incipient martial endeavors of our group against demons. At that point in-game Michael himself (itself?) appeared, blessed the party and its weaponry, and gave everyone religious medallions to wear into the battle – and out-of-game the GM had ready and handed out small, plastic-coated, black and white xeroxed pictures of the appropriate medallion, on string necklaces – one for each of us to all wear! He let us keep those too... so of course I couldn't resist scanning it in for everyone to see. ☺



The most jarring note of the entire weekend was discovering our pre-registrations had been lost... but even that ended well. The guy at registration knew precisely whom to send us to. The particular gentleman we were referred to was right there at the table, and informed us there'd been a small computer glitch which had lost some names. However, before we even had time to become trepidatious he checked a list for our names, confirmed we were there, and had our badges printed up immediately... no muss, no fuss.

Having been to some real doozies of mismanaged cons, I was quite favorably impressed overall with how smoothly this one ran, to the extent that I made a point of complimenting some of the con board (whom I knew vaguely) on how well things were going... which was amusing in its own right when I

realized they were braced for complaints from me -- and they realized I had no complaints, but rather compliments!

All in all it was an extremely pleasant con, and I'll be happily returning next year.

INTERREGNUM #37

SWASHBUCKLING MAGE RIDES AGAIN ♦ JOE TELLER

Oh, I *love* the Anita Blake stories! I consider them absolutely riveting explorations of power and ethics; I *highly* recommend them.

In regards to a comment by **George Phillies** – a *fuschia* motorcycle outfit?! Good god, I missed that... was it in your fictional piece? *laugh* What a frightening visual that creates!

WORDS ON THE WING ♦ CINDY SHETTLE

So you usually create female characters too? Fascinating! I thought I was the only female I knew to do so. I've always been a tad leery of my ability to properly play a male, despite having been assured by friends that I do it well as a GM portraying NPCs. Also I admit males playing females poorly just rubs me *majorly* the wrong way... all women are NOT panting sluts or humorless, rabid feminists, darnit, just as all men aren't arrogant, belching, crotch-rubbing morons! *sigh* Sorry... rant off. I've seen *far* too much of that sort of bigoted garbage on-line recently to find it at all amusing any more. ☹

Funny... I also have a bit of a 'rep' or preference for a certain type of character, although mine is more someone with a very high perception and social skills, rather than avoiding armor and heavy weaponry. That way I can talk to *lots* of folks... *sheepish grin* or as Scott Ruggels and my sweetie like to put it, I am "She Who Must *Know*! Right NOW!!" ☺

As far as the issue of whether to play a male or female character in certain types of games, I admit freely that's a bit of a hot button for me. I don't mind

playing in games where women aren't considered "equal" with men, as long as I'm not expected to play something cringing and subservient, *and* there is an option for a cultural "fringe" character... *and* the GM is consistent.

PLAYING THE "FRINGE"

For example, I'm in a Runequest-style game currently where women fighters are an anomaly for the "main" culture... but there is a small but potent cult of women fighters. I like having that option, should I chose to try it. There has also been (previously in this game) a female character who was a thief, and used cultural expectations to further her career... since *no one* would believe a woman capable of such things, after all! ☺

What I can't stand is the GM that says all women are viewed as equal with men in their game – but hasn't thought through how that would affect the culture at all! and so NPC men do all the active, interesting, adventurous things in the game, while NPC women stay at home and are passive breeders and housekeepers. I always wonder about a GM like this – do they really believe biology is destiny?

CRINGING SUBSERVIENCE

I've seen the other side of the coin too, where the GM seems to take a gleeful pleasure in showing how degraded women are in their game's (supposedly medieval) culture. This type of GM seems to think that rape was a constant daily occurrence in medieval life, rather like getting a drink of water or wearing clothes... which I'm afraid I take issue with, as sheerest poppycock. I remember one game where the GM was startled and confused when I told him hotly and flatly that I was NOT going to roll for how many NPCs raped my character before she passed out -- and then walked out of his game. I won't play a character in a world like that... nor will I waste my time catering to the peculiar sexual fantasies of such a GM.

INCONSISTENCY

Alternatively there are games where the situation I've described above exists: women are postulated as not being equal with men... but to allow female PCs

in spite of this the GM has the female PC treated as if they were male -- completely untouched and ignored by cultural norms. Any female NPCs in the game, of course, are treated as less than doormats. I've played in a game like that, but to make things more interesting I made my character give a damn instead of sitting back and acting as if casual rape was a normal part of everyday life, as the GM apparently expected. So she ended up defending any woman the GM was abusing; defending violently if necessary.

Needless to say the GM rather plaintively asked me what I thought I was doing? I explained my problem with the culture and gave some examples from history as to how it hadn't been uniformly as he was portraying it. The clincher apparently was when I asked him how *he'd* react as a player to a game where all men were considered slaves or property, and useful only for grunt work, breeding, and rape fodder. I'm happy to say that he saw my point, and was kind enough to change his game slightly to a more medieval style culture, rather than the rape-fest he'd had it be previously. I'm also pleased to note that the other players didn't seem to mind in the least -- and that two of them, in fact, thanked me later privately for what I'd done.

TRUE MAGICK ♦ MICHAEL LAVOIE

I found your discussion of what science fiction is rather interesting. I think though that I like best the way Orson Scott Card views it. As I noted in **Firestarter #7** (slightly paraphrased):

I am reminded of what Orson Scott Card wrote in his introduction to Cruel Miracles (which I also highly recommend. ☺) To him, science fiction is "the last American refuge of religious literature." Not inspirational tracts filled with senseless dogma – but rather literature that "explores the nature of the universe and discovers the purpose behind it." Check it out -- it's well worth it, I think.

I think this most closely matches your definition of science fiction as the literature of the imagination. Nicely put by you, I should add.

Interesting that you should mention keeping the gaming hobby growing with recruitment of the young. In the last few weeks I've had that subject come up several times, including the e-mail I mentioned previously in this zine. I'm still working on a potential zine out of the subject... wish me luck!

SIGN OF THE DANCING PRIESTESS ♦ KIRALEE MCCAULEY

I found that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. quote I'd promised you! Here you go... hope you like it!

"...one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. ... Any law that degrades human personality is unjust (emphasis mine)."

-- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

To everyone else, RAEBNC... and as always, thanks for your comments! ☺

A FLEET OF STARS #1

a small zine by david hoberman
<dhoberman@earthlink.net>
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"in the small turn of my soul a fleet of stars comes to port."
-- *Sun the First* by Odysseas Elytis

PROFESSIONAL HEROES

Collie posed the following question to me via e-mail:

What if there's a world where supers are professionals -- because they can't pull the secret identity shtick off successfully? What changes in the genre and in society would this engender?

I've seen this premise explored in a few comics. It is an interesting one, although many take the 'benevolent corporation = front for vigilantism/U.N. versus 'evil company = front for evil baddies'. However I think there's a lot more room for some fascinating scenarios.

I have to state a disclaimer upfront - that I've found very few superhero worlds, in fiction or role-playing that have adequately and effectively explored just how radical the transformations in society would be if powerful super powers were an established fact of life. The Wildcards series of books were one, where if memory serves, some sort of virus killed most who encountered it, made a smaller percentage deformed (jokers) and a vanishingly small minority gifted with super powers (aces.) However there the power levels tended to be fairly low (at least in comparison to traditional superheroes and villains) and there was much exploration of the social and psychological effects of being a feared (aces) or despised (joker) minority. There was also Alan Moore's *Miracleman* comic book where superheroes effectively took over the world. *Astro City* is a more recent entry which in the few I've read, has been consistently excellent in exploring what it means to be far more than human. I'll also admit that my background in this genre is not as extensive as other genres and this is solely my perception from what I have encountered -- further reading by IR writers is happily accepted.

Making being a super-powered being not just a state of existence, but a profession changes the nature of the genre quite a bit -- since for a long long time, supers were seen to operate either a) outside/above the frame of the law as vigilantes (Spiderman, Superman, etc.) or b) super-teams coordinated by some governmental power while given special sanction to do lots of generally totally illegal things. I think the Nietzschean thrill of 'I'm above the law' element is often one of the thrilling elements of the genre -- regardless of what nods are given to characters having to pay insurance for property damage. ;) What if instead, superheroes were more commonly private citizens in industry?

Most super-powers seem to be heavily weighted towards abilities that have some combat application. Perhaps this is a reflection of the typically action-oriented nature of the genre. But think of the money to be made in construction for someone as strong as Superman - he or she could hire himself out as a contractor. Or someone who can interface with computers and retrieve data with their minds -- emergency data retrieval is a lucrative field. There are any number of lucrative options for many superpowers - perhaps even more so for ones that have no combat application whatsoever. This raises a number of questions:

Would there eventually be some anti-competition legislation filed? How would it be enforced? The legal complications alone of super powers are staggering, beyond the stereotypical mutant registration act. Can a telepath who reads thoughts be sued for 'listening in' to a CEO's unwritten business plan and selling that information to a competitor? How could that be proved? Imagine a super-genius turning his gadgeteering ability into a new startup for future-tech or a supersonic flier hiring herself out as a special courier. Supers with the right abilities (and the right managers) might find themselves quite wealthy in short order. A super with the ability to fuse carbon into diamonds would become the prime target of the De Beers monopoly.

What would their reception be in their professional community of choice? One could easily imagine several possibilities - a chilly widespread blackballing... or a frantic rush to curry favor and make alliances. What would it like to be a professional pariah because you could do things with your mind or body that take normal people machines or special processes to do? Or to be a leader in your field - simply because of what you can do, regardless of the vision with which you wield it? (Look at how much people listen to celebrities about subjects they know nothing about...)

Imagine the marketing possibilities and the corporate infrastructure that any but the most ambitious super would need to deal with. Mary the SooperFlier can't handle the business end of things all by herself (unless she's an MBA as well as a supersonic speeder.) Imagine working as a normal in a company where the star employees are the ones the company is quite literally built around. Picture the commercials for these companies "a step above the rest." Picture the sponsorship deals (Mystery Men anyone?)

It's always interesting that the direction of the power imbalance almost always favor the characters (i.e. the superheroes)... what if the PCs were the 'normals' in a world where supers have accrued political and social capital (either after a conflict, or by an end-run around the inevitable hysteria and fear from normals)? Somehow I doubt many players would be interested in a game where they were explicitly the underdog, and non-powered in a world of supers.

The above is not particularly coherent, but that's what happens when the idea hamsters come out to play. The main point becomes that if supers are seen no longer as above or outside the normal operating structure of a society, the potential for great changes increase as their powers are utilized in unpredictable ways by private organizations, routinized (if you can say that about super-powered individuals) into society.

REALISM AND HEROISM

On March 4th, a balmy Sunday afternoon around 3 p.m., I saved a man from being crushed by a train. The experience was so surreal that after a discussion with Collie it became a seed for an exploration of realism and heroism in gaming. Hopefully this personal rumination will cause us to take another look at some of the underlying assumptions that many of us carry with us when we play in a game.

I was standing in the Davis T station, scribbling entries into my newest geek toy, a Handspring Visor, when suddenly I heard a terrified male voice shouting, "oh my god! oh my god!" I blinked and looked up -- and then down. Somehow a man had fallen off the platform into the tracks, and was frantically (and unsuccessfully) trying to pull himself out. I stood there frozen for a second or two, shocked that someone had fallen down there. Apparently I was one of the closest people nearby. Everyone else stood stock still. I kicked my body into motion, and reached down to grab one of his hands. Another good Samaritan, appearing out of nowhere, grabbed the man's other hand, and together we lifted him out and back into the platform. He lay there for a moment catching his breath. I stood there, looking him over - probably in his forties, worn and battered looking. He didn't smell like alcohol or like he'd been on the street for days, but you never know, do you? Someone ran to get the station conductor.

Immediately I was alone again, standing over him. I think I asked him if he was okay. He asked me to please help him up, and I did, standing behind him and raising him bodily to his feet. I didn't know if he was injured, but he looked understandably shaken. The station conductor appeared, asked the man if he was okay. Upon hearing the man's uncertain answer, the station conductor said an ambulance would be called just in case.

I took the next train that came - the one that would have crushed him, had someone not pulled him out. That someone just happened to be myself and another anonymous man whose face I never saw.

It's odd the things you take away from such an experience. I felt completely distanced from what was happening, dazedly fumbling in my pocket for a handkerchief to clean my hands, filthy with the soot that clung to the man's hands when he tried to save himself. I felt ashamed for wondering if he was mentally ill and would freak out on me once I got him up onto the platform. The last thing I felt like was a hero.

In a conversation with Collie, she remarked how odd it was that in role-playing games, our characters often simply leap into action without a second thought. Unless you were trained to deal with crisis life-threatening situations, I imagine there'd be always be a moment of hesitation and decision. While there are always characters whose backgrounds include stints in professions which would lend itself to this sort of training, particularly in the beginning of games, not all the characters are seasoned crisis-veterans. Yet often that plays little role in how they react.

We speak of realism when we run games, a certain verisimilitude that we seek to impose on these imaginary worlds, so that even if it's populated by werewolves and caped crusaders, the things that drive characters and happen in that world bear some resemblance to those in our own world. Perhaps verisimilitude is a better word than realism, for in a way it seems that a role-playing game, like a work of fiction, has its own internal logic (one would hope ;) expressing our dreams and nightmares in vibrant palettes. Not to snub complexity and depth, but it seems that at first glance some of the strongest and most enduring stories in our culture are the simplest ones. Good and evil; love, betrayal and mistaken identity. Fables and fairy-tales and plays with clearly defined roles, protagonists and villains. Even when Othello is ignorant of Iago's treachery, the audience knows from the first what a snake Iago is. It's only relatively recently that fantasy or science-fiction delved into moral shades of grey and tossed out the white hats.

Is this perhaps a quick-and-dirty explanation for the generalized evolution of plot complexity of role-playing, which is after all, essentially interactive storytelling within a rule-structure? From the simplest dungeon-crawls and Tolkien-inspired fantasies where to see an orc was to know it was evil, to the strongly polarized stereotypes of a four-color superhero game, again until relatively recently the moral frameworks of game worlds tended to be far simpler and purer than our own. I think in some respects, that simplicity is comforting, like the rigidity of fundamentalist religion, you always know where you stand, who wears the White hats and who wears the Black ones. Some people prefer the simplicity of such situations for what is after all a recreational activity.

I recall a discussion in forming a gaming group awhile back where we were discussing the possible genres to play. One of the players, who happened to be an on-line news editor, firmly argued for an explicitly heroic setting, because as she put it, "I read about death and horrible things happening all day, so when I come home, I'd prefer something not quite so dark." I've had other players demur in playing in dystopian cyberpunk campaigns for similar reasons.

The face of gaming has changed quite a bit in the last fifteen years, introducing an ever-widening scope of game worlds and outlooks, from bleak and dystopian, conspiracy-minded, heroic, ironic and absurd. Every character is not intended to be a hero... but it seems that some biases remain. How often, even in a dystopian cyberpunk game, have you seen a PC reflexively get involved in a situation where they could have simply rationalized that they were not involved? I'm speaking of immediate-present examples, like seeing someone being attacked by a gang or a marauding pack of mutant dogs... the first reaction seems to be to jump in, guns blazing. Even then, the players very often want their characters to be heroes in a bleak world - I could rattle off incidents in the dystopian games I've run where characters needlessly got involved in situations that would only complicate their lives because they thought it the right thing to do. Despite the overarching amoral viewpoint of the game universe, or the pretensions of moral ambiguity (characters having criminal pasts/occupations, etc...) at some level the urge to be a hero seems to surface. This of course is often complicated by the implicit assumption that for a PC to witness a crime in progress, somehow their observing it or reacting to it is key to the plot at hand, which is a not-altogether unreasonable assumption, no matter how fun puncturing it may be.

Have I just been playing with too many heroically minded players, or have others had the same experiences? When you are playing an ostensibly non-crisis-trained character in a game, how do you balance the reality of the negative ways in they might react (shock, freezing, fleeing), versus the demands of the game (your own desires of what the character should do and the climate of the game)? It seems far rarer to me that a character reacts to a crisis in ways other than becoming directly involved (often even when they don't have to, although that's often not quite the case in darker campaigns, where I've found people feel it easier to be far more mercenary)... and I find myself, in light of my own recent experience, wondering why. What would it be like for a character who is not amoral or explicitly evil to stand aside? What would it be like for the player to play such a character? For the group?

KI-YAH! A DEFENSE OF FENG SHUI

(or Comments to Swashbuckling Mage #8)

In his review of "Munchkin's Guide to Power Gaming", Joe Teller wrote "And finally makes me understand the mindset behind Feng Shui the RPG and why it is not my kind of game."

I wrote to Joe:

- > I'd be greatly interested if you would lay out what your understanding of
- > this mindset is - my sense is that somehow you're aligning it with
- > munchkinism - so that I could perhaps essay a counterpoint/clarification in
- > my zine and not have to wait till the next issue for you to answer the
- > question of just what that understanding is.

Joe responded:

Feng Shu from what I've seen of it and from what the munchkin book says of it, is a system that over emphasizes combat, and is designed in such a way as it is ripe for abuse by those whose main interest is in designing combat monsters with little in the way of role-playing features. The Munchkin book spends a lot of time with its presentation of "Gun Shu" a martial arts package for firearms.

Combat, of course, is only one part of a role-playing game, but when it becomes the main emphasis it slips into Munchking hack and slash.

Hope this helps clarify what I meant....I look forward to your next zine.

[For those of you not in the know, Feng Shui is a game created expressly to mimic the feeling of Hong Kong action movies.)

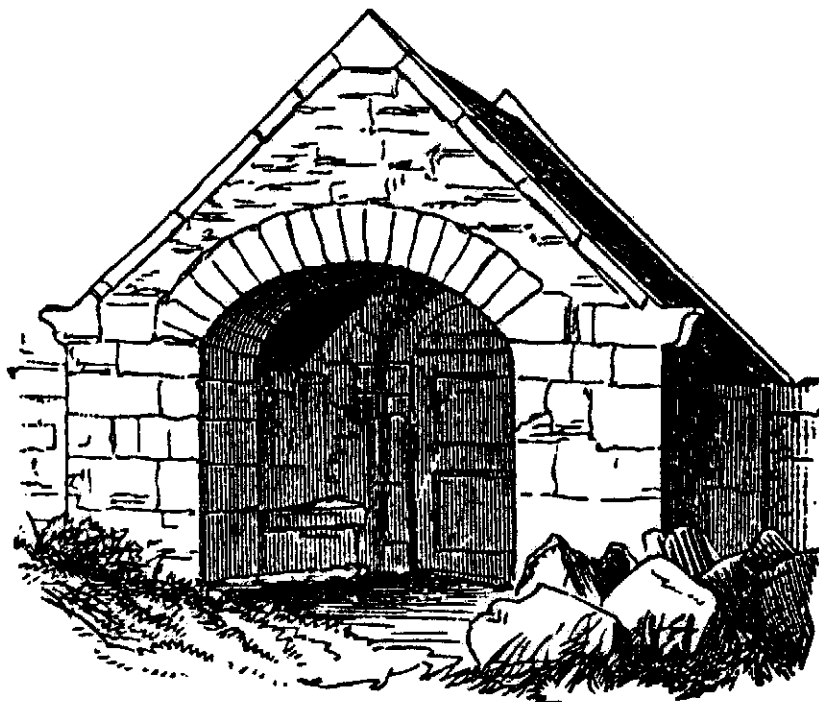
First, I'll say that I have not read the Munchkin's Guide, and that I'm not taking issue with your dislike of what you perceive Feng Shui to be about. Rather, I want to pose an opposite viewpoint from someone who is currently just starting up a campaign of Feng Shui.

I'll tackle this in two parts. First mechanics and then the intent behind the system itself, as cited by the game designers themselves.

I am curious as to whether you've actually seen or read through Feng Shui even in passing. I think a passing examination would reveal the game mechanics to be rather simple, vaguely reminiscent of FUDGE in the 2d6 curve used and the way stats are apportioned. The combat system is light and extremely cinematic. In fact the authors note that for their purposes "guns are less deadly than in real life... as much a fantasy element as magic, supernatural creatures or kung fu." Thumbing through the guns list bears out the startling lack of distinction in damage and combat capacities... to the point where players are encouraged to pick out the gun by the helpful silhouettes provided instead. The magic and kung fu systems add a bit of complexity, but not much more damage capacity.

It would seem that any system designed to pander to munchkins would offer lots of potential for 'getting the best stuff and doing the most damage' so to speak. I'm not sure what "Gun Shu" package the Munchkin guide refers to, since there's no such thing named in the actual Feng Shui book. There are however specific Shticks that allow characters to do highly cinematic things with their weapons. It's specifically an option for players to decide what happens to any nameless thug they score high enough in combat to dispose of -- and its encouraged to simply 'knock them out' in true cinematic style.

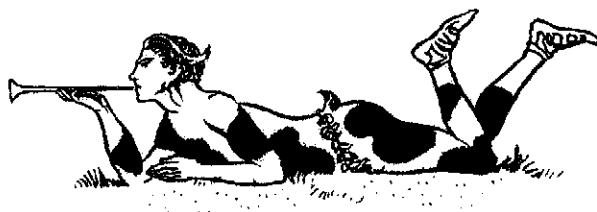
The book itself contains an extensive background and an entire section on running games in the true spirit of the genre and here's where I think the strongest argument against it being simply a 'munchkin game' come from. It's beyond a doubt that cinematic combat is an important part of the genre from which this game was created -- so if your definition of a munchkin game rests on the prevalence of combat alone, I'd grant your point. But the action in Hong Kong movies, stylized and wildly exaggerated as it is, does not take place in a moral vacuum. The best directors use highly choreographed violence as a means through which to frame issues of loyalty, love, betrayal and honor. Much in the same way the superheroic genre dramatizes (among many other things) issues of power, responsibility and inequality through the introduction of fantastic powers to a small segment of the populace. Unlike most western action movies, where the hero triumphs through force of arms and goodness, in Hong Kong movies, often the opposite occurs. Live by the gun -- die by the gun (often as some sappy ballad plays in the background.). Whether or not an actual game of Feng Shui would be a munchkinfest would -- I submit -- be largely dependent on the attitude of the GM (and players) in the game. The game itself, while clearly having the potential to be combat-heavy, is tied to a genre that intends the violence to be the flashpoints of riveting and vital stories instead of an end in itself.



THE SWASHBUCKLING MAGE RIDES AGAIN #9

"When Muses talk we listen... even at 3 AM on a Tuesday."

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Personal Notes:

Last issue came out late because of some health problems that were ongoing between Kiralee and myself. Hopefully we are past those problems and they won't be back. Thanks everyone for your patience.

I'm working my gaming group thru the second scenario for *Cosmic Synchronicity : Earth Unmasked*, a personalized scenario set around on of the player character's background, off camera life and home city (something I had planned for this game after the initial story line to introduce the characters to each other was to sit back and use their own built in plots to keep the action going so that my own workload would be a bit easier in running the game).

The gaming group is back down to 6 regular members and one irregular member, since we now have had one of the group get sent to Germany for a few months by his company (he may or may not be back, its unknown right now). I'm hoping the irregular player can get his life back under control soon, as its not easy working with his absence after getting his character into an important position in the team.

I'm considering setting up a weeknight game group to supplement my need to explore new ideas, attract some fresh blood, and possibly get someone else to run a few games to help me relieve my own bouts with GM stress (I find that I don't burn out if I can both GM and play regularly in different games, but that if I purely GM I eventually burn out no matter how much variety I impose upon the gaming group). Added variety does help some though, so even having two very different campaigns to run can help keep the creative juices flowing.

Word came from Pete Maranci that he's making the move to RI permanent. He's going to drop a stack of old back issues on us for IR, rather than stick them into storage, so we should have some of these available to interested subscribers/contributors in the months to come. I'll do an inventory and be sure to include info on which issues are available for those that want them.

Work continues on "Tinkering With Reality" the optional rules & modules book for *Cosmic Synchronicity*. No date for the alpha release of this as yet, but it will probably be ready before next issue in at least preliminary form.



Comments On IR #37:

(As usual, if I fail to comment it does not reflect on the value or importance of your writing, only that I had nothing specific to say. I do read and enjoy everyone's zines.)

Refugee: I'm not sure I can finish the story in one single issue after the initial piece. I tend to write in a way that is not very "professional", I just go with the flow instead of working with outlines. This tends to mean I need a real editor (in the Victorian sense of the word) who can help me along at various stages of the process, not just take the final result and make necessary cuts and corrections. The stunt woman character is taken from a character that Cindy played in the original Perilous Earth Campaign (as Synchronicity was an NPC from that Campaign). It was a campaign that sadly didn't reach its full potential, as the final storyline had depended far too much on Pete Maranci's character to continue after he had to drop out of the group because of his time limitations from commuting.

Words on The Wing: The mysterious imaginary food you mentioned should be identified to folks here: Crottled Greeps. The problem is that its difficult to distinguish these days between someone who reads science fiction, some who watches sci-fi and someone who is on some level involved in science fiction fandom (and Star Trek is sort of a totally separate culture, though there are crossover fans involved in both). Having spent some time running a bookstore that specialized in SF/Fantasy, Gaming & Comics I tend to be connected to parts of "old" fandom (pre-90s) more than current fandom and its various flavors.

True Magick: The reviews, as usual, were useful. I tend to read reviews to make some of my buying decisions when dealing with material not from my usual purchasing choices (I tend towards GURPS and Chaosium game materials that I can use for my own projects in some way, but do buy some odd things when the reviews make them look interesting).

I do wish that I could get a few of the folks here in IR to sometime sit down and read over *Cosmic Synchronicity* and some of the material I've written for it that I put on the website, so that I can get an idea of where my content and mechanics could use some adjustment. The sort of reviews I've seen (and gotten) on the net in the newsgroups have been 90% useless because they don't go into details and often come into the review with a chip on their shoulder (No game system can be better than their own, or can be more interesting than system x that they have been playing for the past 3 years, or all percentile dice using systems must be basically the same and they hated CoC),

Firestarter: A&E tends to attract a lot of short zines (1-4 pages) in each issue which are heavy into comments more than articles. It used to be more article heavy in years past (or at least it seemed so to me back in those days, I don't actually have any issues going back to the 80s when I first read it). The exception is the campaign write-ups, which are a regular feature. These can range from interesting sources of ideas and humor to abysmally boring, depending on the author, the game and the writing style involved. It's a very different atmosphere than we have here in IR, and one that I just don't fit well into anymore.

Your comments regarding how and what you go about reading in an issue of IR is interesting. I tend to save fiction for last when

reading. Commenting on fiction is hard for me, especially if it is broken up over a number of issues, as my preferred style in reading hardly fits everyone's preferences (Kiralee and I often disagree with books and whether they are good or not).

Reviews are my fallback content material to write. It comes from my training in Journalism and Creative Writing back in High school (and my year as a stringer for a wire service) that I can write a review quickly and fairly effectively without a lot of "waiting for the muse" to hit me. I also, as I've said elsewhere, use reviews by others to help my own purchase and reading decisions. If a book gets enough bad reviews I tend to pass on it, if it gets some good or mixed reviews I'll need to get it and see, if it gets only good reviews and it looks like it's about something that interests me it will probably end up in my reading pile.

The paper from your sociology class was, as always, interesting reading and the concepts of the moral economy are important to remember from a gamer's point of view when designing a setting. Placing characters in a setting that is near the edge of that "boiling point" could produce very interesting results in regards to how people react within the setting.

Your comments (*In Like a Lion...*) To Dale Meier were interesting, and did indeed reflect much of my own worries when dealing with GM enforced religious beliefs on a setting. I prefer to sit back as GM and simply place ethical challenges at players, with only a very limited religious input on my part.

In my current game we're having a lot of fun with a rather odd party : A rabbi, a ghou, a spell casting follower of Bast, a demon's blood infected COE Protestant, and occasionally the

ghost of a Shinto Samurai and an agnostic inventor who is trying to create the perfect woman using robotics and AI. So far, despite their religious differences, they've managed to function as a team and not get into a knock down drag out fight over anything.

Your comments about the "anonymity fosters a lack of emotional connection and a decreased sense of responsibility for one's actions" really hits the nail on the head, and explains a lot of things (including the Nazis, Skinheads, military units in general, even the police in some cases) about why things are done and why certain mentalities develop.

Sign of The Dancing Priestess: I know, I have to finish the story... my muse has been unhappy with me as of late, and has not been helpful in getting things done, nor have the recent problems we've had to deal with (dead computers, roof repairs, your bronchitis, etc.)

I believe you're right about more scenes between Cathy and Synchronicity, especially the idea of explaining about the fetch. The flow of the scene in the restaurant was slightly off, but I don't know how to really improve it.

In regards to Christian gaming comments, I might add that the problem I often see that Christianity wants to be the "One True Way" and doesn't want to accept the validity of other paths or the possibility that someone can be Good and not Christian in recent years (at least in the minds of some forms of Christianity).

This is a pluralistic world, and if running a game in this world's history or present, it should be pluralistic in nature to be truly realistic in the minds of many folks (especially me).

Even if Christianity was the only faith, its various sects and divisions would take to fighting with each other for control over each other's lives (this has happened in some areas that are a Christian majority both historically and currently, such as the battles of words etc between the Christian groups in Colorado).

As a Side Note, I'm looking forward to seeing how GURPS: India comes out when it finishes playtesting, since India in many ways over the centuries has been even more pluralistic than the United States it may provide a model for folks running games on how to approach society and religion in a manner that works better for gaming (most games set in our own country tend to either ignore religion, center on Christianity, center on Neo-paganism, or avoids really taking a pluralistic viewpoint on wide scale). Of course it could fail entirely, since it's a GURPS book that's trying to cover from the period near Alexander's attempted invasion up thru the post-British period in a mere 128 pages.

Props, Paraphernalia & Stage Dressing

I am a firm believer that quality tools can help a GM present the setting, events, characters and ideas within a roleplaying game. I've seen an average GM become a better GM by learning to use some of the concepts of the theater in the game properly.

On the other hand, good props will not make a bad GM better, no more than handing them the best roleplaying mechanic in the world will make them a better GM. Its like handing a monkey a typewriter - despite the laws of probability, don't expect to see the plays of Shakespeare during the lifetime of the monkey from its efforts pounding on the keys.

There are several reasons to use tools. Tools can be used to help get players into the right mindset to play a roleplaying game. There is nothing worse than players who are unable to escape their mundane lives and drag along to the gaming session their worries, troubles, pet peeves and frustrations with daily life with them. Music, I have found, is the best tool for getting people into the mood of the game.

Music also acts as a mental signal to the players after a few sessions - they know that the GM is starting the game and wants a reduction of the non-game discussions and chatter, so that he/she can get your attention. This is similar to the method used in ceremonial magic, religious ceremony and in the theater (the overture) to bring the players in to the mindset of the setting and the realization that the process of the game has begun.

Additionally Music can set the tone of the game. Light music for a Happy Beginning, Somber Music for tense or sorrowful situations, mysterious music for horror or suspense.

Music can also be used to help strengthen the understanding of the culture of the setting. I keep a library of music (left over and expanded regularly from my days as the assistant manager of a music shop) on tape and CD. It includes a wide range of styles to fit period, setting, mood, character types etc. It includes classical, folk songs, ethnic dance music from a wide range of countries, movie soundtrack music, jazz, blues, cajun, zidigo. theatrical show tunes, pop, rock, new age, and even some religious music.

So, if the game is in New Orleans, I use a collection of CDs of cajun, blues, Jazz and Zidigo for background music. If its in Greece, I use Greek folk songs and dance music, if its

medieval or earlier the Childe Ballads or other period music comes into play.

I also like, after a session or two, to create a "Kludge" tape, a collection of music that I associate with the characters involved and the activities they are performing, and of course the villains. These act as theme music for the group, something many players enjoy because it fits the concepts they have developed from movies and tv of characters have their own personal theme music. We even sometimes have them sit and try to figure out which song is associated with each character (a guessing game they can be very good at if you choose the music reasonably). This adds another layer of character identification and connection to the player.

The use of smells in roleplaying should be limited to specific situations. I used incense when I ran my Halloween Cthulhu-like one shot adventure because it was appropriate to the genre and helped set the mood, but if I ran that sort of horror game regularly I would not have used the incense as it is a prop that easily becomes old (and does not work well in many circumstances, such as small rooms with insufficient ventilation or large rooms with too much ventilation or air conditioning).

Generally incense is about the only scent oriented trapping I've consciously used, and that only for some very specific situations. I suspect it could also be useful if dealing with a specific locale (such as a meeting in a temple or a new age store), so long as it could be extinguished easily when the locale is no longer being used, to retain the association.

Visual aids can run a large range of possibilities.

I have found over time that having a nice White board for drawing floor plans, lists and other details on can be useful (we have one on a painter's easel that's easy to stow away if needed when not gaming; but always make sure to have it set up before the gamers arrive so that they can choose seating based on the placement of the board for easy viewing).

Posters, especially things like world maps or posters associated with the setting (or characters) are an easy tool to have up for the game. If you are playing in an earth based campaign a map of the world or of the USA can usually be gotten relatively cheaply (best time to buy is in August when the school supplies all go on sale). If you are lucky enough to have a player that is artistically inclined who wants to do up a poster of the character group take them up on it and get one - it again helps the players link with their character concepts better all around.

I use computer graphics when I want something I will be showing to a single player (bringing them into another room to see what creeping horror is sneaking thru the corridor), or sometimes when introducing a colorful NPC that I cannot describe by words alone.

Occasionally costumes or parts of costumes can be useful as a tool for visualization and in-character immersion, but avoid the use of real world weapons (knives, swords, etc) that may be misinterpreted, cause injury easily or inspire tom foolery that could end tragically.

Photos, newspaper clippings, books of fantasy artwork, tour books, road maps, and even occasional drawings can be used effectively as handouts to help inspire players.

Occasionally oddities can be fun. In my pulp game I used a replica of a "Captain Midnight" Decoder Badge as the coding device a villain was using to communicate with their servants. The players worked at and succeeded at breaking the first code before the device fell into their hands, but found the device useful later when they discovered the badge actually had several dozen settings, each producing a different code. The device simplicity was deceptive in regards to the results it produced.

Tarot cards are another tool to use in a game, and can even be used to redesign the plot based on a player's character interpretation of the result. Many GMs don't plot out all the possibilities in a scenario, some just set things up and see how they flow based on player actions, and a Tarot deck can inspire a new direction for the story to take midway thru.

If using Tarot make sure to get a deck with lots of art, and make sure its one you are NOT going to use for actual Tarot Reading. Use it only for the game if its going to be a game prop.

Food can also occasionally be used as an effective visual aid, though like smells this is one not to overuse. During my Halloween One-Shot we acquired from a friend a large collection of sugar candy (the kind stuck on strips of paper in various bright colors). These made an excellent representation of the LSD the characters discovered in a medicine cabinet, and would determine the hallucination effect - the more candy the players ate the more their characters were eating and the weirder things got.

Gestures, Accents and Body language can also be a welcome tool to the GM's palette, if used correctly and not to an excess. Major NPCs

should have a different body language, accent or gestures when dealing with players.

These may be natural to the character from the time they meet them, or be inspired by the player character's actions. I had one NPC recently that spent all his time looking over each shoulder before talking to anyone after an encounter with a PC Ghost that decided to whisper in his ear after an interview with another character - he was always checking to spot if the ghost was present. This little gesture made a huge difference in the player reaction to the character, and made him memorable.

Another NPC I used would constantly flip a coin in his hand... it seemed insignificant, until a player payed attention and spotted that it was an I-Ching coin and the NPC was actually trying to predict the results of what might happen from what he told the PCs (or so the players thought....). The speed that he was using it worried them, and made them think he was a lot more powerful as a mage than he actually was, based on the coin being flipped.

One of my favorite continuing NPCs almost always is presented with a cross between a Russian and a Gypsy accent. Players later discover two important things, if they are unlucky, the accent is fake and the accent goes away when he's really scared or when he's being very truthful and serious about possible consequences.

It makes the character very real to players, and it also makes the players pay attention, since accents are not used by all the NPCs (I usually only have one or two NPCs that will show up in a specific adventure that use accents).

Lighting is a tool for gaming that should be used rarely, but can be excellent when running horror at night. Always be careful with candles though, as wax does not come out of carpets easily, can easily get on things, and candles can be knocked over by clumsy players to set fires. They throw off too much heat in the summer, and unless you have a number of them may cause eye strain for many.

One last "trick" I used for my Halloween game was to cover or remove all the clocks from the gaming area, closed all the blinds and basically cut the group off from their connection to the outside world, to get the proper atmosphere of being trapped on an island away from civilization.

The use of Props in a roleplaying game can be time consuming, and even expensive, but the results can often be rewarding. Don't worry if a specific prop fails to "wow" them, it takes time for players to adapt to this form of enhancing the game, and not everyone will take to using them right off the bat. Develop them over time, experiment, and never over use any one specific prop.

Encourage your players to get involved in the process. Sometimes they will surprise you with their ingenuity, resources and creativity at presenting effective props for the game, and by throwing themselves into this concept it expands their ability to connect to the setting, characters, and other players.



Review : Kindred of The East

Although this book came out some time ago, I only added it to our collection of roleplaying materials in the past couple of months. Being a hardcover game book (priced at \$25) and for a game system I don't run, I delayed purchase for some time until I had an urge to see what they did with ideas within the book.

Kindred of the East is meant to be used with Vampire the Masquerade RPG, and features the sort of artwork, layout and mechanics that are part of that system.

That aside its actually a nice change from the usual angst-ridden vampires of the masquerade. Instead it focuses on China, Japan and India and draws from the myths of those lands as a background for the creatures of the night.

Although its designed to be used with Vampire, I believe that it could be run without access to the Vampire books, and probably without using any of the other books associated with the World of Darkness (although using the new Hunters books to create enemies associated with the Far East could be done to make it more interesting).

This would be, in my opinion, a good thing. The difference in the feel, nature and background of the world of the Kindred of the East makes me believe that there would be some clash if you try to integrate it with the standard World of Darkness books, its more believable as a stand alone setting.

The folks who put this together obviously did a fair amount of research into the culture, mythology and concepts to be found in these three cultures, and the vampires have a very

different feel to them than those of the standard WOD “western” world.

No clans or lineage systems here, they are not “embraced” into their state. Characters must follow their Dharma, to find and fulfill their karmatic debt within the Middle Kingdom so that they can return to a state of balance of their Yin and Yang nature. They feed off the living in order to acquire Chi (life force) but are not necessarily inhuman or monstrous.

The Kuei-jin, as the eastern vampires are called are created from mortals in a different manner. They must be strong of will to make the transition to their new state.

Just as there is a concept of Yin and Yang in nature, so there are two souls, the Hun (the higher rational self) and the P’o (the lower, bestial and to some extent demonic self). It is the P’o that tells one to take improper actions of dishonorable or shameful nature.

In the vampire they have died in a traumatic fashion that has awakened their P’o at the moment of death, or that during their lifetime the character somehow awakened their P’o thru sustained deeds of depravity or callousness (dropping their humanity score below a value of 5).

The traumatic death is the more common source of becoming a vampire. In the death the twin souls (Hun and P’o) are united into one and the dead shall rise, in a process known as the Second Breathe.

The vampire caused by trauma is not necessarily inhuman or evil, they are a victim and may react to their rising from the dead in a number of ways (seeking revenge, seeking to assist their living descendants and loved ones,

refusing to give up the life they have lost and continuing onwards, seeking the purpose in a *universal sense for their return etc.*).

Thus you can have both “good” and “ill” intending vampires, depending on the source of their passage and the dharma that guides their life path. In the end there is no quiet second life within the middle kingdom, and not everything is “black and white” for there are vampires who move from one state to another, and some who dwell in the middle close to a balance of Yin and Yang in their nature.

Many vampires are not blood drinkers in this setting, some feed by sexual activity, and some even feed simply by taking the breathe of someone else - blood is considered the crudest form of transference of the Chi (life force) that sustains the second breathe of the Kuei-jin.

The setting is a landscape of all those things one associated with the far east, and would work well for telling modern ghost stories, tales of ancestors that return to protect family members, battles of fantastic creatures in complex dances of martial arts and questions of honor, ethics and responsibility.

The supplemental materials that have been published for this setting allow the extension of the possibilities in to the Chinese concepts of Hell, the spiritual worlds that lie just beyond mortal reach (but not beyond that of the Kuei-jin and other creatures like Henegoyaki), the thousand immortals and all sorts of fantastic bits and pieces of the myths of the east.

If you are looking for a different experience than the standard vampire setting, and are willing to enmesh yourself into the philosophy and cultures, than this game book can be an excellent one to experience.



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